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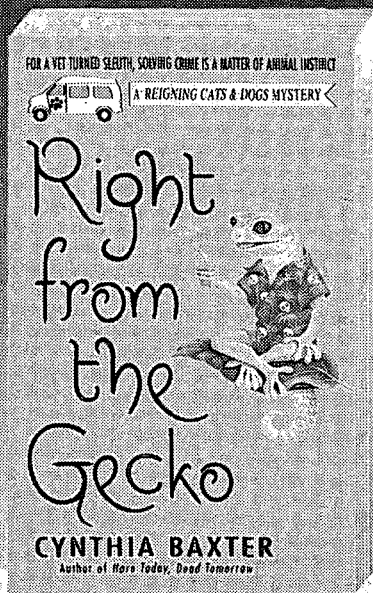
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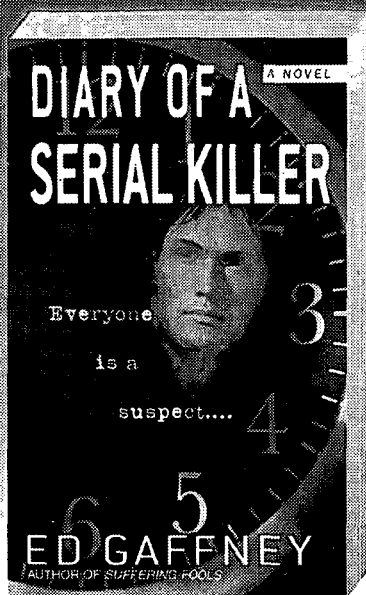
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# A DEAD REPORTER ... A SERIAL KILLER ...



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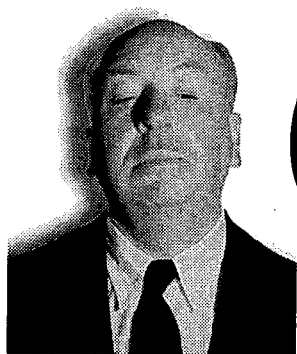
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# C CONTENTS

June 2007

*Cover by Anthony Mullen*

## FICTION

- 4 THE END OF THE TRAIN by Mike Wiecek
- 26 TO HONOR ICHIKO AND DEFEND JAPAN  
by Alan Gratz
- 40 TRUST ME by Loren D. Estleman
- 56 STEP ON A CRACK by David Edgerley Gates
- 84 SAINT CASIMIR'S FIRE by Marianne Wilski Strong
- 110 HOW TO SURVIVE DOWNSIZING by J. Michlitsch

## MYSTERY CLASSIC

- 123 THE SAFETY MATCH by Anton Chekhov

## DEPARTMENTS

- 3 EDITOR'S NOTES
- 23 REEL CRIME by Steve Hockensmith
- 55 THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER by Willie Rose
- 107 BOOKED & PRINTED by Robert C. Hahn
- 121 SOLUTION to the May Unsolved
- 122 MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH
- 141 THE STORY THAT WON

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Indicia on page 143



# EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

## TWO BY TWO

Good things often come in pairs. This month, two favorite characters return, two familiar writers break new ground, and two new authors make their AHMM debuts.

In "Trust Me," Loren D. Estleman's Detroit P.I. Amos Walker finds himself in reluctant possession of Prince Cortez, a fighting cock, as a retainer for his services when a local gang leader is arrested for murder. Meanwhile, Irish mob lieutenant Mickey Counihan returns in another tale of postwar New York as he probes what's really behind unrest at the West Side docks in "Step on a Crack" by David Edgerley Gates.

Marianne Wilski Strong is known to AHMM readers for her popular whodunits set in ancient Greece, but this month she sets "St. Casimir's Fire" in Western Pennsylvania, in a parrish smothered by an underground mine fire that has poisoned residents in more ways than one. Mike Wiecek won a Shamus award for his 2005 story "A Death in Ueno" (AHMM, March), featuring Tokyo P.I. Sakonju. In "The End of the Train" he takes us to the Newark, New Jersey, train yards, where it appears a train loaded with dangerous chemicals has been inexplicably stolen.

We welcome this month Alan Gratz and J. Michlitsch. A Georgia native, Alan Gratz is the author of *Samurai Shortstop* (Dial, 2006) and the forthcoming YA mystery *Something Rotten*. "To Honor Ichiko and Defend Japan" is his first published short story. J. Michlitsch, author of "How to Avoid Downsizing," is a "reluctant realtor" and a blogger at [www.curbly.com](http://www.curbly.com), and is currently putting the final touches on a mystery novel about a realtor, which is tentatively called *Life Estate*.

And we'll note that as of our press date, AHMM columnist and author Steve Hockensmith has racked up two important award nominations. His first novel, *Holmes on the Range*, has been nominated for both a Dilys Award, presented by the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association ([www.mysterybooksellers.com](http://www.mysterybooksellers.com)) for the mystery book that the member booksellers have most enjoyed selling, and an Edgar Award for Best First Novel, presented by the Mystery Writers of America ([www.mysterywriters.org](http://www.mysterywriters.org)). For a taste of his second novel in this series, see what Robert C. Hahn has to say in this month's Booked & Printed column.

# THE END OF THE TRAIN

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MIKE WIECEK

**A**t dawn the industrial park lay quiet, none of its hardscabble manufacturers working a third shift. Security lights flickered off as the sky lightened. An inland breeze picked up, bringing the smell of salt marsh and the cawing of waking birds. Chemical plants and tank farms ran right to the edge of the wetlands, asphalt and chain link a porous barrier between them.

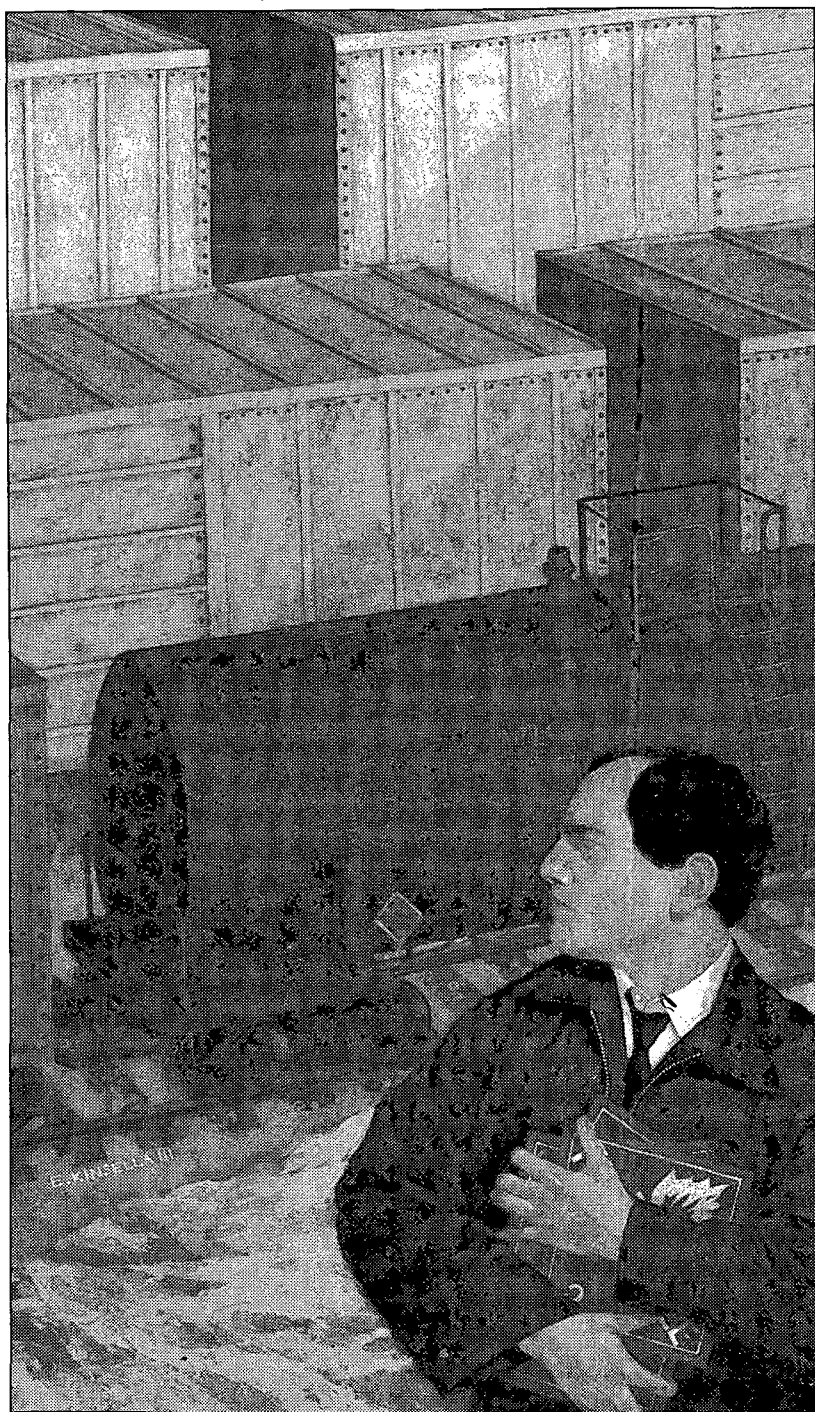
David had arrived an hour earlier, slipping noiselessly to his chosen vantage and easing his ballistic carryall to the ground. Since then, sipping broth from a black thermos, he'd seen only a few vehicles drive past. None entered the park. He was careful not to look east, where the sun's first rays might dazzle his eyes.

Fifteen minutes beforehand, he extracted his equipment from the padded case, softly clicking it together with practiced ease. By habit that probably revealed his age, he sighted in with the optical range finder before activating the digital readout. A hundred and fifty meters, close enough. He ran through the rest of his checklist automatically, every step critical.

You only get one shot.

He looked at his watch—another old guy's habit, since the digital screen carried a min-sec stamp in the corner—and capped the thermos. He knew the schedule as well as the operators themselves. In the distance a train whistle sounded, clear in the dewy air, and David nodded to himself. The grade crossing at Route 16, exactly on time. He bent to his eyepiece, breathed out, and focused. His hands, resting lightly on the controls, were perfectly still.

A few wisps of predawn fog remained in the shadow of the nearest chemical tank. The single-track feeder curved from around back. Just as the lead locomotive thundered into view, a flock of wading birds rose, squawking and flapping around it. It was an extraordinary sight—a dark blue SD70M in full roar, banked on the curve, a dozen pink and black and white herons



caught in mid-flight above it. In that split second David knew he had the shot of his life—

—and a pickup slammed over the curb behind him, spraying gravel as it skidded to a halt, one door ricocheting open. David fumbled, his fingers slipping off the grip. He straightened up and began to swear loudly.

"I knew you'd be here!" The driver was a young guy, hair military-cut, big grin. He came over as the locomotive hammered past, the train making so much noise that neither man tried to say more. David shook his head, looking sadly at the camera in his hand.

When the train had gone and silence returned, David said, "This better be good, Sean."

The young man turned serious. "We lost a train, Dave," he said. "Where the heck's your beeper? We got county cops all over the property, and an hour ago the FBI shows up. Come on, I'll brief you on the way back."

David glanced at his own car, parked a block farther down. "Give me the short version, and I'll meet you there." Then the words finally sank in. "Lost a train? What are you talking about?"

"Gone," said Sean simply. "Thirty-two cars. Disappeared off the face of the earth."

David Keegan loved his job because, first and last, he loved trains. Always had, ever since he'd grown up so close to the New York Central he could watch the signalmen in their tower next to his backyard. At ten years old he recognized the reporting marks of a hundred railroads and could distinguish a GP7 locomotive from a GP9 with one glance at the radiator screens. In high school he built a Heathkit scanner, mounted it in his Dodge, and soon knew as much about operations as the yard's trainmaster. Unlike many rail fans, a mostly law-abiding and conservative lot, he even hopped freights, hobbing around the country during summer breaks.

But for all that, he never wanted to be an engineer. You could go deaf rattling around on your bedroll in a freezing boxcar, and fifteen-hour shifts in the cab didn't seem like enough of an improvement. So he avoided drugs and hippies and the counter-culture generally—albeit not without an occasional wistful glance—and joined the police academy straight out of high school. An occupational exemption from the draft was a bonus. In 1968, while his friends went to love-ins and Vietnam, David became a Special Railway Agent on the Pennsylvania Southern.

Nearly four tumultuous decades later, through mergers, abandonments, deregulation, the collapse of most major roads and the consolidation of the rest, Penn Southern somehow survived—and



so did David. Almost at retirement, he was now special agent in charge for the railroad's busiest district, centered on Newark. He and a few dozen officers patrolled eight yards, two thousand miles of track, and more vandals, thieves, vagrants, criminal rings, and white-collar fraud than anywhere else in North America. He had solved murders, broken up gangs so organized they could strip a container bare in fifteen minutes, and recovered three million dollars stashed in a Caribbean bank by a bent procurement executive. He had saved lives and, once, killed a drug-addled squatter who attacked him with a bowie knife under a trestle.

He'd never had an entire train vanish.

David met Sean at the classification yard's dispatch center, a forbiddingly blank building of Sixties-era brick and aluminum, topped by a 360-degree glass tower. They had to park a hundred yards away.

"Where did all that come from?" David gestured at the executive limos, police cars, and civilian vehicles overflowing the center's lot.

"The CEO's here. Wherever he goes it's a rolling cluster—" Sean cut himself off. "You know."

Inside the tower was bedlam: a dozen people clustered around a pair of computer terminals, trainmasters trying to do their jobs, and one skinny, goateed technician hunched over his keyboard. David immediately picked out Penn Southern's CEO, a posse of yes-men ranged at his back. The sheriff stood to one side, and another pair of men in dark suits could only be the FBI agents. Including Sean and himself, the room was armed for a serious firefight.

"Where have you been?" The CEO rounded on him, glaring through rimless glasses.

"I got here as soon as I heard." David nodded at the sheriff, who gave him a brief smile. She'd been reelected last year in a landslide, on a record of competence rather than politicking, and they got along. "Who was in the locomotive?"

"Nobody knows." The CEO seemed not to have found his scapegoat yet. "We spend two hundred million dollars a year on computers, and all I get is excuses!"

A long pause. The yes-men frowned.

"No one listed on the call board?" David asked finally.

Sean answered. "There was a jam at the receiving yard," he said. "Some rockhead in a pickup went off Southside Avenue and knocked a fence over the lead. Incoming traffic was backed up for two hours, and the yardmaster went bananas. No one was paying much attention."

David raised an eyebrow. "Accident?"

"Maybe," said the sheriff. "Maybe not. Couple of detectives are running it down."

"Good." David thought for a moment. "The trainmaster must have radioed the engineer before he left the departure yard. And there would have been transmissions later, routine stuff, at the waypoints. He doesn't remember?"

"Two dozen trains went out last night," said Sean.

"Still." He might have come late to the show, but David was assuming the authority natural to his position. A mystery train was his problem to solve, not the CEO's. "The radio calls must have been routine, or the trainmaster would have noticed something was wrong. Don't we record them all automatically?"

The technician raised his head from the flat-panel display and nodded. "Just getting it now, sir. The problem is sorting through—we don't have voice-to-text, so someone's going to have to listen to hours of the road channel." He tapped some keys and the recording started abruptly, in the middle of a transmission, interrupted by bursts of static. It was the usual yard business—brief instructions to the hostlers, acknowledgements, laconic position updates—filled with abbreviations and jargon and slang. They listened for a minute, and it all sounded normal to David.

Outside the tower windows he could see five hundred acres of track, where every day two thousand freight cars were shuffled, shunted, recoupled, and sent on their way. The yard was so large that crews used ATVs to move around, the logistics so complex that only computers could keep track of the big picture. Watching the vast ranks of cars, with switch engines puttering here and there and the endless rows of silent freights, it seemed more credible that they could lose track of a few.

The CEO brought him back to the room, talking loudly over the recorded radio chatter. "We haven't told the shippers yet, and by God, there better not be even a whisper leaked to the press. I want this train set found in the next hour, hear me?"

Murmurs of support from the yes-men. The FBI agents looked on impassively; the sheriff rolled her eyes at David.

"Where was it going?" he asked.

The tech turned down the volume and handed him a printed carload list. "Train number 432, up to Tennebrul for breakdown," he said. Tennebrul was a flat yard in Connecticut.

David studied the sheet. "Industrial tankers . . . one LCL lading, some petrochemicals. A little unusual for Tennebrul."

"How so?" the sheriff asked.

"Not so much heavy industry around there. These kinds of carloads are usually headed inland or south."

David scanned the manifest's "Hazard ID" column, noticing several code numbers indicating dangerous cargo—toxics, flammables, volatiles. The substance names themselves had little meaning for him; like the yardmen and operators, he usually paid attention only to the hazmat placards on the cars.

"Okay, so it left here, when?"

"Oh-one-twenty." Sean had picked up a military-clock habit in the army. "The dispatcher's sure of that, since he logged it. We'll listen to the radio traffic, but like you said, it couldn't have been anything out of the ordinary. The cars clocked the AEI detector at Croxton, everything normal."

Most freight cars carried passive electronic transponders that identified themselves on the fly to detectors stationed along the track, the data collected centrally for railcar tracking and analysis. Croxton was a few miles away, near the eponymous Norfolk Southern yard.

"But already thirty minutes late at that point," Sean added. "Traffic was really slow last night."

"Was the locomotive GPS equipped?" Penn Southern was still playing catch-up; only about two-thirds of its fleet had electronic positioning equipment.

"Yup. That's how the dispatcher knew something was wrong. Everything was tracking fine until it just blipped out a few miles past Croxton. He thought it might have been a malfunction—sometimes it just goes down, you know—but he couldn't raise the engineer. He got worried quick and shut down service ahead and behind."

"He red-signaled the main line?" David raised an eyebrow. "No wonder the yard is jammed. We're going to be digging out for a week."

"No sh—" Sean cut himself off again. "Yes, sir."

"I don't understand how you could lose three dozen cars," said the older FBI agent. "What's that, half a mile of rolling iron? Wouldn't someone have *seen* it?"

"It's mainline trackage." Sean realized he was still the center of attention and had to clear his throat. "Civilians hear six or seven trains an hour, they're not going to know one from the next."

"No track workers in the vicinity?" David asked.

Sean nodded. "That's what the dispatcher thought of too. He called around until he found a maintenance-of-way crew nearby. They drove up and down the track twenty miles and didn't see anything. That's when the balloon went up."

"And until then, nothing unusual." David spoke more to himself than anyone else, but Sean answered.

"Well . . . one thing, sort of. No FRED signal at Croxton."

After the roads phased out cabooses, they still needed some way to identify the last car of a moving train—to make it visible to overtaking traffic and to let automated equipment like bridges and switches know the train had entirely passed. Management used the acronym EOT, for "End of Train" signaling, but everyone else called it a F—ing Rear End Device.

"Unless the train was braking, it would only signal every forty-five seconds or so," David said. "If there was interference or cross-traffic the detector could have just missed it."

"Yeah, that's true."

The sheriff spoke up. "What do you mean, the MOW guys didn't see anything? What about other trains, if it was so busy?"

"Oh, they found the other trains—one ahead and one behind, right where they should have been. But nothing in between."

"It has to be there," snapped the CEO. "Probably on a siding, broken down."

"Or something," said David. "It went in and it didn't come out, so it has to be in there somewhere."

"That's the puzzle," said Sean. "It's not."

They drove out in two cars, David and the sheriff in her cruiser, Sean chauffeuring Special Agent Mattingly, the younger of the two FBI men. The sheriff flipped on her lightbar and took surface roads, thirty miles over the speed limit, shoving aside morning commuters. David decided he wasn't embarrassed to repeatedly brace himself against the dashboard, white knuckled.

"Maintenance department must love you, Lizbeth," he said. "How many patrol cars have you totaled?"

"Never had an accident, thanks." She glanced at the rearview. "Sean's keeping up okay."

"Trying to lose him?"

"Oh, not Sean." She grinned. "He's my dreamboat." David snorted.

He had a proprietary system map, and he led them to an undisputed point along the double track. Sean pulled up when they stopped and everyone got out.

The neighborhood had been home to light and heavy industry for one hundred and fifty years. Ancient brick buildings abutted the tracks, ghostly signs of faded paint on their walls. Potholed asphalt separated modern warehouses thrown together from corrugated metal. Sheaves of conduit and high-voltage cable drooped



across the alleys. Trucks idled everywhere—at the loading docks, double parked, snugged into the bays.

"There are sidings and turnouts every hundred yards," David said. "Half of them haven't been used for decades."

Another slow freight rumbled past on the main line, a fifty-car mix of containers and flats. Trains were leaving the yard as fast as the crews could line and shove them, trying to clear the backlog. Exhaust drifted down, a cloud of particulates in the bright sunny air.

"This is where the GPS signal stopped," David said.

Lizbeth looked up and down the track. "Those cars could be anywhere. Not even all together—just dropped off one at a time and tucked into the odd warehouse."

"That would have taken too much time, constantly switching the whole train in and out. It had to go as a unit."

"Let's think out of the box, here," said Mattingly. "Could they have, I don't know, been picked up by trucks or something?"

"Trucks so big they'd be illegal on the streets, and it would have taken hours. And they would have left all kinds of marks in the ground. Try again."

"Got it." Sean snapped his fingers. "Skyhook helicopters."

David hesitated, and Special Agent Mattingly looked thoughtful. "How much does a train car weigh? There's a Russian helicopter that can lift twenty tons."

"Three to four times that, loaded," David said. "And the locomotive's even heavier."

"Seems like someone would have noticed, anyway," said Lizbeth.

Mattingly's cell phone rang. "Excuse me." He walked off a few yards to have a low-voiced conversation.

Lizbeth borrowed the map. "The Hackensack River is right over there. Maybe . . . off the bridge and onto a barge?"

David looked. "I'm not sure that's a navigable waterway. It would be as noisy and messy as the truck idea too."

"You tell me, then."

"I don't know." He kicked at the rail near his boot. "These turnouts, they don't all go to dead ends and industrial sidings. More rights of way have been abandoned than I can keep track of. Maybe the engineer took it down some forgotten shortline."

"Does that map of yours show the abandonments?"

"No—"

They were interrupted by Mattingly, who strode back, his cell phone still open. "Wrap it up," he said. "Someone stole the train, all right."

"What?"

"They just e-mailed in a ransom demand."



"Look at the consist again!" The CEO waved the car-list print-out in David's face. "Wasn't anyone paying attention?"

They were back at the control tower, Lizbeth having outdone herself on the drive back, siren screaming the whole way. Even Sean couldn't keep up, though he barreled through the door a few minutes later.

David reached for the paper, but the CEO snatched it back. "Potassium cyanide, phosphoric acid, vinyl chloride, and ammonium nitrate. Three cars of chlorine gas, then sodium metal, followed by anhydrous ammonia and hydrofluoric acid." His pronunciation was spotty.

Special Agent Mattingly shook his head; he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You carry this stuff in unprotected railcars?"

"Sure," said David. "Hundreds of them. We see dozens of chlorine tankers every week. Even the cyanide isn't that uncommon."

"This is worse than an atom bomb!" the CEO shouted.

David frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Somebody built themselves a super-duper hazmat IED." The technician was still in his chair before the computer screens; sweat stains growing on the back of his shirt. Other IT employees had appeared and were scattered around the room at other terminals. "We figured it out while you were gone. Look, the way the cars are ordered, you have, like, three carloads of really toxic stuff—chlorine gas or hydrofluoric acid—and then an explosive, and it repeats like that down the whole train. If you detonate the explosives, tie a stick of dynamite to each one or something, you get a cloud of poison that could kill people for miles around."

"They assembled it on their own? Just whose train was this?"

The CEO let out a roar of rage and frustration. "Once again, nobody knows!" The yes-men shuffled and glared.

"We were hacked," the technician said hesitantly. "I think. We're trying to trace the orders, but there are authorizations missing. Password discrepancies. Sysop-level overrides."

Special Agent Mattingly broke in. "You mean, someone just ordered up a death train, like he was shopping online at Amazon? He wasn't even here at the rail yard?"

"No." David turned to him. "I think I'm getting it. There are far too many cars to schedule manually. People input the reqs and orders and delivery details and all the rest, and the computer keeps track. The yardmasters look at their terminals, and then they pass the actual switching orders to the hostlers on the ground. If a hacker got into the system, he could arrange for whatever he wanted."

"Which seems to be what happened," the technician said. "The block was assembled and moved to the dispatch yard. The last order we can find left the switcher coupled up. All the hacker had to do then was sneak in and drive it away."

"But . . ." the CEO floundered. "But the train disappeared before it even got out of the subdivision. Where did it go?"

"Hoboken." The senior FBI man entered the conversation, holding yet another printed piece of paper. "Here's the e-mail. It arrived at whitehouse-dot-gov fifty minutes ago. No signature."

"He e-mailed the White House?" The CEO couldn't believe this. "Not us directly?"

"I think he wanted attention."

"He got it," said David. "What are the demands?"

"Eleven point four million dollars, wired into a Nauru-registered bank, by noon," said the agent. "Or he'll detonate the entire package."

"Or she," muttered Lizbeth, just loud enough for David to hear. He looked at her. "You never know," she said.

"What's Nauru?" asked the CEO.

"A South Pacific tax haven," said the FBI agent. "It's not a bad tactic. We don't have time to set up a trace from our end, and the Naurans . . . Naurites . . . authorities there won't cooperate at all. The money will be long gone by the time we figure out where it's going."

"You're not actually going to pay up, are you?" David said.

"It's not my choice," the agent said dryly. "I believe the governor and the president are discussing the matter now." He looked down at the message. "He appended a list of all the cars, identified by number, contents, and origination. It's no hoax."

One of the yes-men decided to earn some points. "The ransom amount, eleven point four million, I believe you said—isn't that rather, um, precise?"

The special agent read off the e-mail. "In fact, eleven million, four hundred twenty-nine thousand, one hundred and seventy-three dollars. And eighteen cents." He looked up. "Does that mean anything to anyone?"

The CEO let out a strangled noise, and his face went even more red. David looked at him curiously. No one answered.

"Google it," Sean said to the technician. "Just type in the number and see what comes up."

"That won't be necessary," the CEO said through gritted teeth. "The amount matches the compensation reported on our last 10-K."

"Compensation?" Lizbeth frowned. "Oh. You mean, yours?"

He nodded once, shortly.

"Just yours?"

"Yes!" Another long pause. The underling who'd been foolish enough to raise the question had a stricken look on his face.

"Well," said David eventually. "Could be a message there."

"Makes it sound like an insider," said Lizbeth.

"The SEC reports are public, though, so anyone could have looked it up."

Mattingly made a note. "We'll see what the profilers say."

"Hoboken's just across the river from Manhattan," said Lizbeth.

"What kind of radius would this poison cloud have?"

The senior FBI man answered. "A lot depends on dispersion rates, wind speed, and so forth, but they found some expert who says we could expect fifty percent lethality within five miles."

Silence fell around him. Only the dispatchers, oblivious under their headsets, continued to talk in the background.

"Maybe the wind will blow the other way . . ." said the CEO hesitantly.

"Sure," said Lizbeth. "Onto New Jersey? Or would you prefer Staten Island instead?"

David was struck by a sudden thought. "How much fuel did the switcher have?"

"Good question." Sean looked at the technician. "Can you find out?"

Before the young man could answer, David shook his head. "I don't trust anything from the computer, at this point. Right? Let's go talk with the guys who actually know."

Stepping out of the dispatch center, David, Sean, and Lizbeth stopped short as a trio of humvees squealed to a stop in front of them. The vehicles were a dark, ominous color, unmarked, with military plates and an excess of aerials. Men in black armor and helmets hopped out—no, *deployed*, that was the only verb that fit—from the vehicles, carrying submachine guns. An M1079 van rolled up behind them, its windows opaque and covered with mesh.

Lizbeth looked at the closest soldier. "Who the hell are you?"

"Counterterror detachment, ma'am," the man said.

"Put those weapons away. Someone could get hurt."

"Ma'am." The soldier's eyes were obscured by the reflective visor of his helmet.

"What authority are you operating under?"

"Sorry, Sheriff." The soldier glanced from her to David and Sean.

"And you are?"



David shrugged off his growing annoyance. "Special Agent in Charge."

"No, you're not," the man said calmly. He paused a beat, then said, "Oh, you mean for the railroad. Got it."

The paramilitaries had formed a cordon around the building—facing outward, David noted, surprising himself by briefly worrying it would be the opposite.

"Well?" Lizbeth sounded impatient.

"The governor has requested federal assistance. Further details are compartmented."

"Forget it, Lizbeth," Sean said.

They all stared at each other for a while.

"I don't know what good you can do here," David said. "But we're not going to argue about it. Try not to shoot anyone, okay?"

The soldier turned away, dismissing them, and they walked warily past the military vehicles.

David didn't feel comfortable until they were well into the yard, surrounded by track and long lines of freight cars. As the day warmed, a comforting smell of creosote rose from the cross ties, mixed with diesel and bearing oil and industrial volatiles. Distant clanking and banging sounded irregularly, as cars were blocked and shifted in the acres around them. Ballast gravel scuffed underfoot.

"Someone's taking this seriously," Sean said.

"Too seriously. The CEO's not going to be able to keep it secret with them around." David looked carefully left and right, then stepped across another track. Loose cars coasted down from the hump, silent until their wheel flanges squealed into the retarders. Careless switchies could lose arms or legs, or their lives.

"The FBI, I see why they showed up," he said. "But where's the FRA response team? Or the state police? Or even the National Guard? These military superheroes . . . they're violating posse comitatus just being here."

Lizbeth shook her head. "The President can declare an emergency and authorize, well, pretty much whatever he wants. We had a staff lawyer from Justice here last year, did a presentation on the new rules." She jumped over a switchpoint and adjusted her gun belt. "Anyway, your IT guy seemed on the ball. I wouldn't want to be the hacker once those commandos get his name."

"Computer forensics." David shook his head. "No telling how long it'll take, and we've got a two-hour deadline. Best we keep working it from our end."

Halfway to the crew shed, they came on a yardman walking alongside a slowly moving engine, holding a small control unit that

was strapped over his reflective vest. When he saw them approach, he and the engine stopped simultaneously.

"Hey, Jack," said David.

"Hiya, Dave." The man's face was lined and weather beaten under his battered safety helmet, his Carhartt overalls deeply stained. He grinned. "I was wondering when you'd show up. Must have been some night they had—the whole yard's froze up, and they're starting to stack the mainline sidings in front of the intake."

"Anyone ask you about train 432?"

"They asked, but I didn't come on until eight. I talked with some of the third-shift crew, though. They were going crazy, switching cars all over the yard. Breaking down cuts right after lining them, just to clear room. Billy said he moved one gondola three different times."

Lizbeth was studying the switchman's chest. "Is that one of those remote control things?" she asked.

"Yeah." He looked down with a grimace. "Union fought for years, but you can't hold back progress—not when it means cutting out more jobs. No more two-man crews, since you don't need anyone riding point anymore. First time I saw an engine running with nobody inside, it was just plain scary. But you get used to anything, I guess."

"What's the range on it?"

"Oh, twenty or thirty yards, maybe, if you've got line of sight."

David and Lizbeth looked at each other.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" he said.

"He's a hacker. So he knows electronics."

"The departures yard is right next to Arsenal Street. Warehouses and a fence. He could walk it right out of the yard without ever stepping foot inside. Then he climbs in, and off he goes."

"Let's check it out."

They took their leave of the switchman and headed for the north side of the yard. The exit portal was a half mile away, and David, still wearing the fleece shirt he'd put on at four A.M., was sweating uncomfortably when they arrived. Sean called the dispatcher, and after some discussion, led them to a siding occupied by a long set of double-stacked containers. A whistle sounded nearby, and they backed up to the flatcars while a long consist bucked and strained and slowly moved off next to them. David listened to the wheels clacking, gradually picking up speed.

"Right here," said Sean. "Last confirmed sighting."

The yard fence was only two tracks away.



"Ninety-four minutes," said David from the passenger seat.

"Check with dispatch," said Lizbeth. "See if the guy's e-mailed in again."

"Don't worry, they'll call as soon as anything happens."

Sean had gone off to the maintenance shops to find out more about the locomotive, figure out what kind of driving range it had been fueled for when it left the yard. Lizbeth and David went back for her cruiser and followed the tracks out of the departures portal.

"I understand about the hacking and remote control and all," said Lizbeth, "but it's still hard for me to believe he could get away with it. Didn't you boost yard security after 9/11?"

David sighed. "Look over there," he said, pointing back at the yard. Inside the razor-wire fence they could see a row of battered and graffiti-ridden freight cars, with more beyond.

"So?"

"The cars." David waited. "In particular, those containers, and the reefer, and the tankers."

"I don't . . . wait. The graffiti. I'll be darned."

"Right. Teenage daredevils with spray cans run circles around us. There are just too many holes in the perimeter, which is too long anyway. We've got no chance against a determined criminal."

"And you the chief of security, no less. All right, now I'm worried."

"Believe it."

They continued along the tracks, bumping over turnout rails and weaving through alleys to stay near the right of way. A smell of burnt oil and solvents lay heavy in the air among the industrial buildings.

"This is pointless." Lizbeth abruptly pulled over. "We're miles from where the train disappeared."

"Maybe."

She yanked off her sunglasses and rubbed her face, then looked at him. "You're on to something," she said. "What?"

"How do we know where the train was last night? Once it left the yard, no one actually saw it. Radio calls, AEI logs and the GPS in the locomotive. It's just more electronic noise. Why couldn't our guy hack them too?"

Lizbeth looked skeptical. "Breaking into your computer system is one thing. Isn't GPS based on satellites? And how would he fool the AEI detector?"

"The detector just responds to an ID signal. Maybe he could clone the tags, drive out and broadcast the right signatures directly into the detector—you know how close the access roads get you to Croxton. The train wouldn't have to be there at all."

"It can't be that easy."

"I don't know. They told me the dispatching servers were invulnerable." David shrugged. "If you knew the radio frequencies, that would take care of the GPS, too, since it simply broadcasts its telemetry."

"Telemetry," she said. "Signatures. You're talking like you understand this stuff."

"Sean does. I try to keep up." Another thought occurred to David. "And he probably just didn't bother with the FRED, which is why the detector missed it."

The radio crackled, and they paused long enough to identify the call as unrelated police business. Lizbeth drummed the steering wheel with her fingers.

"That's how it disappeared," she said. "Son of a gun. It was never there to begin with."

"And that's how he got it to Hoboken. I've got one of our corporate librarians going through the old maps, and I'm sure he'll find some ancient rail line or abandoned passenger track or something. Once he was off the grid, he was on his own."

"But it doesn't do us any good." Her voice broke in frustration. "You said it, there's a million possibilities. Where do we start? Here?"

David looked out the window. Across the curb a barbed-wire fence guarded a metal shop lot, with scrap iron and half empty cable spools rusting on the pavement. Farther down, Jersey barriers enclosed a fleet of graffiti-ridden panel vans. Seagulls cawed and fought each other at a dumpster. Old track laid between cobblestones curved around the nearest building.

He swung open his door. "As good as any," he said. "I'll walk, you drive."

But before he could get out of the car, Lizbeth's cell phone rang.

"It's Sean." She clicked it on, grunted, listened, made a sound of surprise, and said, "No, wait there. We're only a few minutes away."

David pulled his foot back in and slammed the door. "What?"

"The missing locomotive." She squealed into a U-turn and turned on the siren. "It never left the yard at all. Sean's looking at it right now."

The MP15 sat stained and dusty and cold and quiet, by itself on a spur halfway down the backside of the classification yard. A row of silver tankers hid it from the tower. When the sheriff skidded to a stop, they saw the special forces team spreading out along the cars at a jog, weapons ready, a handful of yardmen looking on astonished.



"Are those it?" Lizbeth made a rapid gesture at the tankers. "We need a bomb squad out here. Maybe Newark can send us theirs."

"No, no. Those are dairy cars, not the same type at all. Look at the diamond placards—they're only carrying milk."

Sean appeared down the row as they got out of the cruiser.

"Where's the end of the train?" Lizbeth yelled. "Where's the bomb?"

"Not here. Nowhere close by, we've looked." As he strode up, his radio squawked loudly, and he turned down the volume. "The CEO hightailed it as soon as the call came in, but he's ringing in every few minutes from that stretch SUV of his. How about you talk to him next?"

David ignored the question. "We have an hour. Lenny and Joe and you, plus Lizbeth, and maybe we can borrow some of those guys from the black helicopters. More than enough. With ATVs we can cover all the tracks."

"There must be a thousand cars here!"

"We're looking for tankers, and they'll be placarded red and orange. Who has that printout of the cut?" Sean pulled the folded paper from his shirt pocket. "Share it around and let's get going."

"Wait a minute." Lizbeth looked at them both. "Why do they have to be in the yard? Maybe he hauled them out, dropped them off in one of those warehouses or old plants or who knows where, and brought the locomotive back to confuse us."

"He's a computer guy." David spoke with assurance he didn't feel. "Not an operator. I don't think he could have done all sorts of complicated switching. He just shoved the cars out of the way and let someone else pick up the locomotive."

"It doesn't make sense!"

"Why would he bother going all the way to Hoboken? He could detonate the consist here and kill just as many people." David made a broad gesture toward the yard. "It's like that story about the stolen letter. What better place to hide a train than right in among all these other cars?"

"But—"

"Yeah." He cut her off. "It's weak. But it's the only chance we have."

At seventeen minutes before noon, they came back together at the dispatch tower. Sean slammed his ATV to a halt and vaulted off just as Lizbeth pulled up. David drained the plastic bottle of water he'd been handed by Lenny, one of the other on-duty railway agents.

"Nothing," said Lizbeth. The others shook their heads.

"I'm sorry," David said slowly. They looked at him. "We don't have enough time to get away."

Inside, the tower was almost deserted, only Special Agent Mattingly still there. He sat on one of the dispatchers' chairs, cell phone in one hand and a landline receiver in the other. His jacket sat crumpled on another chair. He looked up as they came in.

"They're going to pay the ransom," he said.

Lizbeth glanced around the empty room. "The CEO finally ordered evacuation?"

"No." Mattingly shrugged. "Word got out anyway. I'm surprised the news teams aren't here yet . . . actually, maybe I'm not surprised, come to think of it."

"When did everyone leave?" David asked.

"That computer guy bailed a half hour ago, and the others all disappeared pretty soon after that."

Outside, the yard lay silent under the bright sun, no cars moving anywhere, no vehicles, no one walking around. To David, accustomed to the constant ebb and flow of clanking freight, the stillness was eerie.

"It really was an accident," said Lizbeth. She'd been murmuring into her own radio, its volume just loud enough for her to hear, and she now clipped it back onto her belt. "The truck last night, that blocked the tracks, remember? The detectives checked the driver's story—he was drunk, coming out of one of those bars on Southside. Lots of witnesses, blood alcohol point-one-nine. He was too intoxicated to have planned anything."

"Bad luck," said David thoughtfully. He stared out the window. "But good luck for our hacker, perhaps."

Lizbeth caught his eye. "What?"

"It could have been just one guy all along. That's why he didn't actually take the train—he didn't have the resources." The puzzle assembled itself in his head, as fast as he could talk. "The technician—I don't even know his name."

"Nick . . . something," Sean said.

"He did it." David spun to Mattingly. "Your people are probably fastest. He won't be at home. His car, maybe? Travel reservations? You know better than me how to run him down."

Mattingly looked at his two phones, chose the landline, and dialed rapidly. "You're sure?" he said, eyes on David.

"One guy," David repeated. He was certain, intuition running ahead of his ability to reason it out. "He had to have inside information, deep, detailed information—I've been here for thirty-eight years and I couldn't figure out half of what he did. He needed access to the yard, at least once, to capture the AEI signatures."

"Access logs," Sean said suddenly. "He probably signed in and out last night."

"Sure." David nodded. "And if we get someone external to audit the computer systems, they'll find all sorts of evidence."

"Half an hour," said Lizbeth. "He's still in the radius."

"Exactly. He was here the whole time, keeping tabs on us. He's not suicidal, so he won't blow it up. We're fine."

Mattingly broke off his first call, dialed another, and held his hand over the mouthpiece. "What do you think," he said. "Cancel the eleven mil?"

Of one mind, they all swung to stare at the big, old-fashioned clock on the center wall, and they watched the last minute tick away.

"You couldn't be sure," Lizbeth said late that afternoon, sitting with David on a pedestrian bridge over the choke point of tracks funneling into the departure yard. The spot was a favorite for switchies on break, plastic crates to sit on and the deck littered with cigarette butts. The setting sun burned red and orange through the New Jersey haze, illuminating the yard in a mellow glow. Everywhere cars were banging and bumping around, as multiple crews worked to clear the congestion that had stacked up through the night and day.

"The engine," said David. "Why was it all the way back in the yard? Either he moved the whole train out and concealed it somewhere outside, or he didn't. But we didn't find the cut. There was no obvious reason for the engine to be there."

"He had them build the train up, and then he had them break it down. And no one noticed."

"It was the hazmat placards. He waited until the train was assembled, ready to go, and then he swapped them all out. Assigned them all perfectly innocuous numbers—vinegar, soda ash, beet pellets, whatever. When orders went out to breakdown the block, it was after shift change, so different guys were doing the work. All they remembered was moving around some standard agribusiness freight. The cars ended up scattered, the MP15 got parked after the last shove, and train 432 was on its way to glory."

Security lights began flickering on around the perimeter. A mainline freight rumbled beneath the bridge, three locomotives pulling a long line of double-stacks. The lead engineer saw them and waved, his hand a brief flash outside the cab window.

"I wonder why he did it," said Lizbeth.

"Eleven million bucks isn't a good enough reason?" David shrugged. "Maybe he got a lousy performance review. Maybe the CEO was rude to him in the hallway. It doesn't matter."

"I guess not." Lizbeth leaned back against the bridgeway's railing. "You know, that was a mighty big risk you took there, at the end, telling Mattingly to halt the wire. We could all be dead now."

"I took my best shot," said David. 🦉



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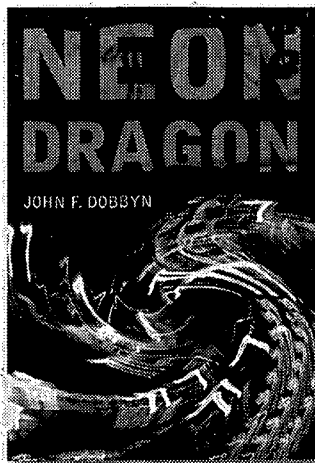
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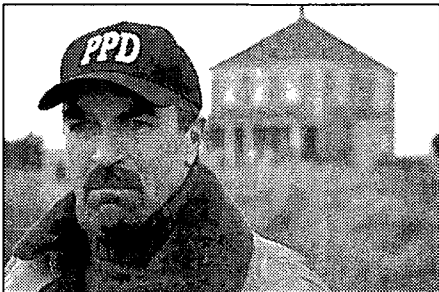
STEVE HOCKENSMITH

**D**on't be fooled by the upcoming CBS TV movie *Jesse Stone: Sea Change*. Despite the title, it's not an adaptation of the Robert B. Parker novel *Sea Change*. Or so says Robert B. Parker.

Sure, the telefilm (set to air during May sweeps) is based on one of Parker's popular Jesse Stone mystery/thrillers. But it's still not an adaptation. Parker prefers the term "approximation."

"It's barely recognizable," he says.

Not that the best-selling author's displeased with *Jesse Stone: Sea Change*, which finds police chief Stone tackling some very big trouble in his very small town. Nor does he have any complaints about the three other *Stone* TV movies that have aired on CBS. Quite the contrary.



Tom Selleck. Photo © CBS

"Tom Selleck has got Jesse nailed," he says of the former *Magnum, P.I.* star, who first played Parker's brooding, alcoholic hero in the 2005 ratings smash *Stone Cold*. "When I watched the first one, I was close to actual tears at hearing my language so artfully interpreted."

That was a welcome change of pace for Parker, since in the past Hollywood's had him on the verge of tears for all the wrong reasons. Take *Spenser: For Hire*, for instance. The 1985–1988 series starred Robert Urich as Parker's beloved Boston private eye . . . or did it?

"Bob came directly from *Vega\$*, where he played [P.I.] Dan Tanna, to *Spenser: For Hire*, where he played exactly the same character," Parker says. "[The show] had very little to do with my work, other than using some of the characters' names. I didn't think the people involved understood *Spenser* at all."

Even when he got the chance to script *Spenser* projects himself (as he did with a trio of A&E TV movies that swapped Urich for Joe Mantegna), Parker came away dissatisfied.



"We didn't have enough money," he says. "They didn't turn out as well as I would have liked."

Strike three came a couple of years later, when Parker tried to interest Tinseltown in *Double Play*, his thriller about Jackie Robinson's historic (and risky) season as major league baseball's first African-American player.

"I did about ten pitches in five days and at the end of the fifth day I went back to the hotel, had a drink, and retired from show business," Parker recalls. "I had one person say to me after the

pitch, 'Who's Jackie Robinson?' Everything you've heard about Hollywood is true, if not worse. So I went home."

But though he was done with pitches, Parker was still willing to let someone else take a swing at his books. Especially if that someone was named Tom Selleck.

"I'd worked with Tom on a couple of his [TNT] Westerns, sort of play doctoring," says Parker. "And we have a mutual friend, Michael Brandman, with whom he's in a producing partnership. So when Brandman called me up and said, 'Tom wants to do *Stone Cold*,' I just said, 'I bet we can make that work.'"



Robert B. Parker. Photo courtesy Penguin Group USA

And work it did—so well that (according to some reports) CBS chieftain Les Moonves would like Selleck to commit to a *Stone* series. But Parker says that's not going to happen anytime soon.

"That's tough work," Parker says of producing a TV show. "The star is in every shot, there are twelve-hour days, twenty-two episodes. Ick. Tom doesn't want to do it. And I don't blame him. I wouldn't do it either."

In fact, there's only one chore related to TV or movie projects that Parker's still happy to perform: walking to the mailbox.

"The thing I liked best about *Spenser: For Hire* was that every week the check came," Parker cracks. "Someone once asked me why I sell the rights to my stuff to television and film, and I said, 'For money! What other possible reason would there be?'"

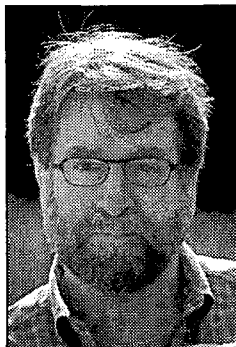
At first blush, it seems like director Robert Harmon's as fed-up with Hollywood as Robert B. Parker.

"Making a film is very, very difficult," says Harmon, whose first feature was the 1986 cult-fave thriller *The Hitcher*. "In particular, I find shooting a film very unpleasant."

Yet he's still willing to drag himself behind a camera every so often—which is a good thing for Tom Selleck and Robert B. Parker fans because Harmon deserves a lot of the credit for making the *Jesse Stone* TV movies so successful.

Harmon directed all four *Stone* telefilms (and a fifth, currently in the planning stages, will most likely be his to helm if *Sea Change* nets the same high ratings as its predecessors). A former photojournalist and director of photography, Harmon brings a cameraman's eye to everything he directs. As a result, the *Stone* movies have a more cinematic feel and darker palette than your usual TV fare.

"We try to make them as much like theatrical films as we can," he says. "We do big, wide shots and try to establish a certain mood, and nothing ever takes place in a new building. Though these are contemporary stories, we want them to feel timeless. We don't want an obvious retro feel—the characters don't drive around in '70s cars. But it has something to do with the *Jesse Stone* character. Almost a refusal to join the modern world."



Robert Harmon

That's something Harmon can relate to, at least in terms of Hollywood. Although *The Hitcher* made him a hot property in the '80s, he let years pass before he made another project, admitting that he "basically didn't want to go back and make another movie." (One movie he had nothing to do with, by the way, is the dud *Hitcher* remake that landed with a thud in theaters this winter.)

Harmon eventually got back in the saddle with the 1991 John Travolta action-drama *Eyes of an Angel*—only to get knocked back out of the saddle when the film tanked. After one more big-screen effort (the 1993 Jean-Claude Van Damme vehicle *Nowhere to Run*), Harmon turned to television work, eventually directing Selleck in the Emmy-nominated A&E movie *Ike: Countdown to D-Day*. That led to the *Jesse Stone* projects—and, for Harmon, the perfect work pace.

"It's fairly rare to have a series of television movies [instead of an episodic show]," he says. "And we've got a really nice family of crew people, and Halifax [where the TV movies are shot] is a really fantastic town—a great place to spend a couple months a year. So it's pretty unique. I like it."



# TO HONOR ICHIKO AND DEFEND JAPAN

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ALAN GRATZ

**W**e silently arranged ourselves around the dirt infield, the scratched foul lines forming an invisible wall none of us dared to cross. A paper lantern hanging from a pole on the pitcher's mound illuminated the five members of the Mainstream Society, with Tetsuo on high. The strange light made his eyes gleam like blank obsidian orbs, and no one could tell who Ichiko's self-appointed enforcer had in his sights. Around the diamond, my schoolmates looked half scared, half excited.

"Who are you?" Tetsuo called to us.

"We are sons of Ichiko," we answered.

"What is your name?"

"Our name is Ichiko."

"Where do you come from?"

"Our bodies and souls were formed in the womb of Ichiko."

"Why are you here?"

With all the fervency of the guilty, we cried out as one: "To honor Ichiko and defend Japan!"

Tetsuo let the windless night lay heavily on our shoulders before he continued.

"Let no man here believe we perform this ceremony for a common criminal," he told us. "This is not some *eta* we condemn tonight. He is one of us. Our brother. He is Ichiko. This is not a punishment, but a cleansing, and you here will be witness to a rebirth. With your help, we will set our brother back on the path to manly virtue."

Two rows behind me, a boy whimpered.

"One among us," Tetsuo announced, "has left Independence Hall by night and scaled Ichiko's sacred Wall of the Soul. Worse, he has abandoned his brothers to seek the pleasures of a *woman*."

The stillness was perfect, as if all six hundred boys held their breath at once. Here was the cardinal sin for an Ichiko boy—not only to think about but speak to, to *touch* a girl! The very idea

was both horrifying and electric.

"Haruki Ichikawa, step forward!" Tetsuo cried.

Every eye searched the crowd for the accused boy. I heard Kenji gasp at my side.

I stepped forward.

Another time it might have been more difficult. Like other boys before me, my legs might have failed. I might have stumbled to the ground, or had to be dragged to the center of the circle where my punishment awaited. But in truth, my first step toward this line had been taken days ago, and I was just now arriving. What's more, I now knew my path was true.

I moved near the center of the circle and stood my ground as Tetsuo spoke.

"As evidence," he said, "I present a page from the register of a vulgar brothel from two nights ago, a register with our brother's name upon it!" Tetsuo turned his dark face to me. "Haruki Ichikawa, it is the verdict of the Mainstream Society that you have violated the Ichiko code of honor, and that you must therefore receive the clenched-fist punishment."

Confident as I was, my heart raced as I took my place on the mound. There, where I stood every day during baseball practice as Ichiko's number-one pitcher, I had never felt so afraid. Six hundred eyes glimmered in the darkness like hungry wolves.

Tetsuo stepped in front of me. "It is never easy to punish a brother," he said sincerely. "But as always, we will carry out our sacred duty with tears in our eyes and resolve in our hearts. When we are done, Haruki will rejoin his mother school."

Tetsuo turned on me then, the light catching as a sparkle in his eyes. The first clenched fist met my face, and I felt the hot explosion of blood from my nose. The next fist slammed into my gut, doubling me over. The third buried itself in my kidneys, making me wet myself uncontrollably. I fell to my knees.

Tetsuo stepped away and let the next member of the Mainstream Society take his place. He waited until I had regained my footing and hit me again and again and again. Then the next member stepped forward, and the next, and the next. When the pain was so blinding I could no longer see to stand, they kicked me where I lay.

The Mainstream Society finally finished their work, and I fought the darkness that threatened to swallow me. With my last ounce of energy, I raised my head to glare at Tetsuo. I wanted him to see my eyes, to know that not even a clenched-fist punishment was going to sway me.

I knew he had committed murder, and I was going to prove it.

"Now," Tetsuo announced, "I call forth the eleven members of the Executive Council to deliver *their* punishments."

I awoke to the sound of a crackling, popping fire. The stone floor below me was cold and hard, but it was nothing compared to the thousand places on my body that screamed in agony. I shifted and let out an audible moan:

"Oh, Haruki! Haruki, are you awake?"

I recognized the voice of my friend Kenji. He placed a palm to my face, and I winced.

"The bath is almost ready. It was all I could think to do—"

I worked my eyes open and saw Kenji stuffing more kindling into the stone oven underneath one of the baths. He scrambled to find something more to feed the fire and perfunctorily patted his robes, finding a scrap of paper, which he wadded into a ball and stuffed in among the glowing embers.

Kenji helped me off with my bloodstained uniform and lowered me into the bath. It was hard to tell where the scalding water began and my flaming bruises ended, but soon the hot bath was working its magic on my sore body.

Beside me, Kenji was on the verge of tears.

"I'm so sorry," Kenji whispered. "This has all been a huge mistake."

"No," I told him. "I did go to a brothel two nights ago."

"Haruki!"

"I went to a brothel," I interrupted, "but not for the reason Tetsuo would have the Mainstream Society believe. I went for information about Nakamura's death."

Kenji looked to the ground. "But . . . Nakamura committed suicide."

"No. I didn't think so from the start, and now I'm sure."

I grunted, trying to straighten my right arm. Something popped, and I screwed my eyes shut against the pain.

Kenji dabbed a wet cloth on my forehead. "What makes you think Nakamura's death was not seppuku?" he asked.

"Someone wanted it to look like ritual suicide, but it wasn't . . . it wasn't right. There were little things. He pitched backward, not forward."

"Does that matter?"

The throbbing in my arm subsided, back to the general level of the excruciating pain everywhere else.

"When my father committed seppuku, he fell forward after cutting himself open. He collapsed on his empty belly."

Kenji's ministrations paused, and we let the matter of my father's suicide pass without further comment.



"Is that all?" Kenji asked.

I shook my head. "The cut was jagged, as though he had hacked his way across his stomach and up into his chest. When my father killed himself, he was only able to cut half as much, and he was a grown man, a trained samurai. Nakamura was a boy of sixteen, and a frail one at that."

"Frail but fierce," Kenji reminded me. "And he was using a kitchen knife, not a *wakizashi*."

I nodded at both points, though it literally pained me to do so. Kenji was right—in the short time Nakamura had been at Ichiko, the first-year boy had proven his fighting spirit again and again. And the knife that was used was hardly a samurai short-sword. But there was something else, another reason why I was sure Nakamura hadn't committed seppuku. I saved that for later.

"His death poem," I told Kenji, "it made it sound like he killed himself over the guilt he felt for visiting brothels. Like he could no longer live with his shame."

"That's what the police said. They checked registers at brothels throughout Yoshiwara. They found his name everywhere."

"Yes, he visited many brothels only once, but there was one he visited again and again. The police didn't interview the girl he visited there, but I did. I paid for a night with her, and a few questions was all it took to understand. The girl he was visiting *was* a prostitute, but she wasn't his lover, Kenji. She was his sister."

Kenji looked shocked. "She told you that?"

I nodded. "Her family sold her to the house many years ago, before Nakamura came to school here. He knew she was in Tokyo, and after tracking her down, he began to visit her regularly."

Kenji sat back, his eyes wide. "Did she tell you anything else?"

"Nothing. But whoever murdered him knew he went to the Floating World frequently—and used that as an excuse for his suicide."

"You really think someone at Ichiko killed Nakamura?"

"Yes. And I think I know who. Tetsuo."

"The head of the Mainstream Society?"

"The clenched fist is almost proof. I came too close to the truth."

Kenji sat back on his heels. "Well, I hope it worked. I hope this punishment puts you off this silly inquiry for good."

"On the contrary," I said, pulling myself up out of the water. "It has only strengthened my resolve."

Kenji moved to help me. "You can't be serious! Haruki, don't be a fool. Tetsuo could . . . He could kill you too! And why should you care so much anyway? Nakamura was a *baka*."

My body cried out again as I lowered it to the ground. I knew

Nakamura had been unpopular, even among the boys in his year. His "fighting spirit" had gotten him into brawls with half a dozen boys, seniors and first-years alike. Kenji was right—Nakamura was a fool. That made it even more difficult to explain, so I didn't try.

"I don't know. I just do."

Kenji wrapped me in a towel. "It was lucky you were the one who found the body, then," he said, although from his tone he meant just the opposite. Kenji had been my best friend since our middle-school days, and I knew it hurt him almost as much as me to see me in pain. Almost.

"I'll get him, Kenji," I promised, wincing as I tried to stand. "I'll get him."

At dawn I skipped the optional morning baseball practice and went instead to the school doctor. Under the circumstances, I thought the team would understand. The doctor, a timid, sickly looking man named Otoka, was ready and waiting when I arrived. He wore large round glasses, and as he saw to my injuries, not once did he ask how I had covered half my body with bruises, sprained my left arm, and broken two ribs, a nose, and a finger. Together we pretended I had come to him with nothing more troubling than a cold, and our quiet conspiracy continued as he wrapped, splinted, and bandaged me. As Headmaster Kinoshita reminded us again and again, we at Ichiko, the First Higher School of Tokyo, were the future leaders of Japan. Our dorm was a training ground for statehood. We students were responsible for disciplining ourselves—no matter how far we went.

Otoka-san dismissed me with a nervous, wordless bow, and I found myself in the courtyard, with half an hour left before the first bell. The team would still be practicing, but I didn't feel like facing the baseball field again just yet. It wasn't just last night's clenched-fist ceremony; three days ago I had been the first to morning baseball practice, and the first to discover the eviscerated body of Toshihiro Nakamura in that gruesome mockery of seppuku.

But why the baseball field? If Nakamura didn't die by his own hand, why had his killer left him there? Was it just so he would be found early the next day?

An idea occurred, and I checked the clock tower. Just enough time to visit the dining hall that bordered the baseball field.

The students assigned to breakfast duty were busy cleaning up the kitchen when I arrived.

"It's too late for food!" one of them said testily. No one liked cafeteria duty. When the students had demanded better food, the headmaster had fired the cooks and handed control of the kitchen

en over to us. Another "training ground for statehood." Now each of us worked four shifts a month, cooking, serving, or cleaning.

"I'm just here to check the schedule," I told them. They grumbled and got back to work.

The schedule for the next day was already posted, but what I wanted was the duty roster for four nights ago—the night before Nakamura was found sliced open on the baseball field behind the cafeteria. I flipped back through the pages until I found the dinner shift I wanted. Three students had been assigned dinner clean-up duty, the last shift of the night, but one of the names was crossed out.

And in its place was written the name of Toshihiro Nakamura.

"Who are you?" Tetsuo demanded.

The boy got tongue-tied, and Tetsuo cuffed him.

"Who are you?"

"I am a son of Ichiko," the boy warbled. Tetsuo was harassing a first-year in the bathroom, and I slipped in quietly behind them.

"What is your name?"

"My name is Ichiko."

"Where do you come from?"

"My body and soul were formed in the womb of Ichiko."

"Why are you here?"

"To go to the bathroom," the first-year said, cowering even as he uttered the line. He wasn't quick enough, and Tetsuo's rap caught him hard on the ear. The senior raised a fist to strike again.

"Reminds you of Nakamura, doesn't he?" I interrupted.

Tetsuo froze, then slapped the boy in the face. "Don't ever insult Ichiko like that again," he warned the first-year. The boy took that as dismissal, half bowing and half dashing out the door.

"What is *your* name?" Tetsuo asked me.

"Don't pull that stuff with me, Tetsuo. I'm not some first-year you can push around anymore. Second-years and third-years are equals."

Tetsuo harrumphed and went to the sinks to wash up.

"Ever since Nakamura talked back, these first-years have gotten uppity," he said.

"Bothers you, does it?"

Tetsuo stared at me in the mirror. "Yes. It should bother you too. Every boy at Ichiko should take pride in his school."

"Or else?"

"Or else."

I grunted in pain as I pushed myself off the wall where I leaned. "Or else you'll do to them what you did to Nakamura?"

Tetsuo dried his hands and turned. "And just what did I do to Nakamura?"

"Well, to start with, you bullied him."

"So? I bully everybody. I picked on Nakamura for the same reasons I picked on you and everyone else. You were first-years. You had to be taught respect."

"Nakamura was your pet project," I said, drawing close. "After he showed you up that day in the bathroom, you beat him senseless. That should have been enough, but even after that you tormented him. You never let him have a moment's peace. Why?"

Tetsuo looked down at my bruised and bandaged body, then stepped around me.

"Maybe it was the essay he wrote in the school paper condemning athletes as barbarians," he said. "Maybe it was the way he asked for seconds in the cafeteria, when first-years don't *get* seconds. Maybe it was the way he always made fun of the school song, gave funny answers to the Ichiko questions. I kept torturing Nakamura because he kept deserving it."

"Did he deserve to die too? Is that why you killed him?"

I expected Tetsuo to lunge for me. Instead, he laughed. He laughed long and hard.

"Me? Kill Nakamura? That's rich." I waited while he calmed down. "No, Nakamura was in line for a clenched fist, not a murder. Besides, didn't he kill himself?"

"No. If he did, it wouldn't have been like that."

"No? Why not?"

There was no point in keeping Nakamura's secret any longer. "He wasn't samurai. Nakamura was born a commoner. He never told anyone—except me."

From the look on his face it was news to Tetsuo, but he shrugged it off.

"So?" he asked. "Maybe he wanted to be one."

"His grandfather was killed by a samurai, for no good reason. He hated them, and he hated all of us for being the children of samurai."

Tetsuo casually stretched out his back, hanging by one arm from a low ceiling beam. "Aren't we all commoners now? Didn't the Emperor elevate the *heimin* and lower the samurai? Besides," he said, dropping to the floor, "like the questions remind us, we're all reborn in the womb of Ichiko when we come here. What we were before doesn't matter. It's what we do here, now, that matters. We're sons of Ichiko, and that makes us brothers. He might not have believed that, but I do."

Tetsuo straightened his school uniform and walked toward the

door. "Nakamura had a clenched fist coming—not a sword in the belly. It would have fixed him too. Like you. Girls can get you into trouble. You see that now, don't you?"

"Yeah," I said. "Right."

"You were among the last to see him alive. Did you know that?"

Kenji looked shocked. "What? Oh, you mean—of course. We had cleanup duty together that night in the cafeteria."

Kenji and I sat together in our dorm room that night, bent low over a candle and paper.

"I saw your name on the duty roster," I told him. "Moriyama was supposed to work with you that night, but his name was marked through and replaced with Nakamura's."

"Moriyama," Kenji whispered. "You don't think he—"

I shook my head. "He doesn't have anything to do with it. Nakamura came to him that day and asked to swap a cooking shift next week for cleanup duty that night. Moriyama was happy to trade."

The candlelight played on Kenji's face as he considered the new evidence.

"Nakamura changed his shift to be there that night. Why? To meet someone afterward?"

"That's what I think. The kitchen cleanup crew are the last students to return to the dorm at night. What better way to meet with someone in secret than to be gone for a real reason? All his roommates would think he was just running late in the dining hall."

"But who did he meet?"

"I was hoping you could tell me."

Kenji shook his head. "I don't remember anyone else coming by. Now that I think about it, he said he would finish up with the mopping. He sent us back to Independence Hall early."

I frowned. "Did he seem preoccupied at all? Nervous? Did you notice a knife was missing when you were cleaning up?"

Kenji looked pained as he searched his memory. "No. I'm sorry. I don't remember anything unusual. I wish I could help."

"I'm chasing sparrows," I confessed. "But at least this places Nakamura near the baseball field that night. The only question now is who was he there to meet?"

"You don't think it was Tetsuo?"

I wanted to, but I had begun to have my doubts. Tetsuo hadn't risen to my accusation, but that didn't mean anything. It was the other things he said that were making too much sense. If he knew Nakamura was visiting a brothel, he would have just used that as an excuse to put him through the clenched fist. And there was no



denying that Tetsuo believed wholeheartedly in the Mainstream Society. He had been one of its founding members. If anyone believed that stuff about being reborn at Ichiko, it was Tetsuo.

But if not Tetsuo, then who?

"I don't know. Let's go over what we have." I spread out a few notes, and all the newspaper articles I had clipped since the incident. "Nakamura switches shifts so he can work late at the kitchen. He sends everyone else back to the dorm early, presumably so he can meet someone. Let's say it's Tetsuo. Besides being enemies at school, the only thing that connects them is that they both visit the Floating World."

"Exactly!" said Kenji. "How would Tetsuo know Nakamura had been going to brothels unless he was visiting one himself?"

"So," I said, dipping my brush in the ink, "Nakamura sees Tetsuo visiting Yoshiwara. He sends word to Tetsuo to meet him in the kitchen the next night after everyone else is gone. Nakamura tells him that he'll reveal what he knows unless Tetsuo stops torturing him at school. It was blackmail!"

"Now that you mention it, I do remember Nakamura being happy that night. Like he had a fox by the tail! But wait, if he told everyone about the visits to the brothel wouldn't they both be in trouble?"

"Don't forget—Nakamura was just visiting his sister. I doubt Tetsuo could say the same. Nakamura would still be punished, but think how much worse it would be for a founding member of the Mainstream Society."

"Tetsuo couldn't take that chance."

"Exactly. He picks up a knife from the kitchen and stabs Nakamura—"

The rest of the room suddenly got quiet, and I realized I was practically shouting. I bowed my apologies to my other roommates and returned to a whisper.

"He stabs Nakamura in a fit of passion. But now what can he do? He can't leave an Ichiko boy there, dead, in the kitchen. There will be an investigation. He decides to cover it up by staging a seppuku, which means a dangerous dragging of the body somewhere a little more believable, but still close by."

"Under the cherry trees that line the baseball field."

"Right. He finishes the job, hacking Nakamura up in the best imitation of a seppuku he can, making lots of mistakes that are overlooked as Nakamura's own untrained mistakes—"

I stopped short.

"What?"

"The suicide note. What would he have used for that?"

"The duty rosters in the dining hall."

"No. No one would believe he decided to kill himself on the spur of the moment. Especially if he had been in a good mood. The roster on the back would give it away as a fake."

I pulled out the *Asahi Shimbun* with the picture of the suicide note on the front page and spread it on the desk. "Look, here! The bottom of the note is torn!"

"Does that mean something?" Kenji asked.

"It means that Tetsuo could have had a piece of paper with him—something he couldn't just leave at the scene. He tore a blank piece from it and wrote a note that would make it look like Nakamura had killed himself over his guilt from visiting the Floating World. It means," I explained, "that if we could find the other half of that piece of paper, we'd know who killed Nakamura."

A low rumble shook the wooden floorboards and paper door, and the rest of the boys in the room got quiet. Slowly the thunder organized itself into an unmistakable cadence: *boom-chi-chi-boom, boom-chi-chi-boom*.

"The last of the first-year rooms," Kenji whispered. "They're storming it tonight."

*Boom-chi-chi-boom, boom-chi-chi-boom*, the stomping and scraping grew louder as the mob reached the top of the steps and made its way down the long hall. A year ago, as new students, it was a sound that had struck fear into our hearts—another of Ichiko's violent rituals the teachers turned a blind eye to. Now a few of our roommates stripped down to their loincloths and took up kendo sticks, dashing into the hall to join the storm.

Kenji and I scrambled to the doorway. I shivered as a herd of wild boys dressed only in headbands and loincloths paraded down the hall, stamping and beating the walls as one. They paused when they reached the first-years' door, one last delicious torture for the boys inside who trembled under their futons, then crashed through the paper door, whooping and hollering like monkeys. A hundred boys crammed their way into a room built for ten, smashing anything of value and beating senseless the quivering lumps huddled on the floor.

The storm destroyed everything in its path. It was the last rite of passage for first-years, the crucible that turned mama's boys into Ichiko men.

Shaking, I slid the door closed on the screams of the first-years. I *had* to find out who killed Nakamura, had to draw the line the headmaster refused to draw for us. If Independence Hall was a training ground for statehood, I would be the leader of its rebellion.



You could tell which rooms belonged to first-years by their doors. The rice paper panels the administration installed each new school year were destroyed during the storms, and the boys were forced to repair them using the only paper they had left—old homework pages. I passed a first-year in bandages pasting his door back together after last night's storm, and it made me think of Nakamura's torn suicide note. It was ridiculous to think I would find the other half of that paper. In five, now six days, his killer would have had ample opportunity to destroy it.

At breakfast, the first-years sat huddled over their miso soup, praying, if they were anything like me last year, that no senior would suddenly take an interest in them. First-years in the dining hall weren't allowed to talk or look up from their food, and most certainly not allowed to ask for seconds. Nakamura had done all three with regularity.

Tetsuo was holding court at a table of seniors across the room. He caught me staring at him as I took my seat, and finished telling a joke that set his friends to laughing raucously. I bent low over my miso soup like a first-year, shunning the conversation of my roommates.

A bench screeched against the stone floor, and from the sound of his booming voice, I knew Tetsuo had stood up.

"This soup tastes like piss!"

There were happy shouts of encouragement from the senior tables. Everyone was watching Tetsuo now, either openly or surreptitiously, and begrudgingly I glanced over my shoulder to see what he was up to.

"What do you first-years think?" he said, striding over to their tables. He was baiting them, of course. If they spoke, he would punish them; if they didn't speak, he would declare it an insult and punish them anyway.

"I said, this soup tastes like piss," he said, bending low to a first-year who was trying desperately to become part of the table. "Do you agree?"

There was no right answer, but it would be worse to say nothing. "N-no," the boy said, almost so quietly we couldn't hear him.

"No? Here—" Tetsuo took the boy's bowl and, to the delight of his audience, pulled down his trousers and urinated in the boy's soup.

"There now," he said, replacing the bowl. "Drink that and see if you don't agree."

I stood and left so I wouldn't have to see any more. I hoped my departure would be lost in the happy pandemonium of his stunt, but Tetsuo saw me and smiled at me all the way out of the dining hall.



Tetsuo wasn't at baseball practice later that day, which was unusual. We had no coach like the American Meiji school did, so our practices were student-run. When Tetsuo was around, that meant they were Tetsuo-run. I regretted not being able to practice, but my arm was still in a sling and my ribs screamed angrily whenever I bent double. The boys looked like they were having the best practice ever, but I left them to their fun and headed back to Independence Hall.

There was a minor stir in the hall when I reached my floor. Most of the boys were at athletic practice, but the few who didn't play sports were gathered around one of the first-year rooms a few doors down. It was Nakamura's old room. Looking inside, I saw the place had been turned upside down and inside out. Papers were strewn across the floor, futons were ripped open, floorboards pulled from their nails.

"Another storm?" one of the boys asked me.

"No. The storms only come at night, when everyone is in their rooms." I stepped inside. It looked like a storm had passed through, all right, but nothing was destroyed. Just tossed about as though someone had been looking for something.

If whatever he was looking for was here, the intruder had surely found it. Still, I poked about to see if I could get some clue to what he was searching for.

"Please tell me you did this," came a voice from the door. Tetsuo.

I stood and turned. "You know I didn't."

"Do I?"

"I notice you weren't at baseball practice today."

"I was off campus, on official Mainstream Society business. I was investigating the brothel Nakamura visited most. Did you know that Nakamura wasn't going there to have sex? He was visiting his sister! Can you believe it? She wouldn't say much more. Someone's got her pretty scared."

*I don't doubt it*, I thought. And how convenient that Tetsuo could now claim to know everything from his "official investigation," not because Nakamura had caught him in the act.

"I thought the matter of Nakamura was closed."

Tetsuo walked in the room and looked around. "Your . . . comments made me reopen it."

I watched as he idly searched the room, pushing things around with his feet.

"Someone was looking for something," Tetsuo said. "Do you think they found it?"

"You tell me."

Tetsuo smiled at me again, raising a spilled box of brushes with

the end of his sandal to peek underneath.

"I've had enough of this farce," I said, turning toward the door. "I know you—"

I stopped short, staring at the door.

"You know I what? Say it. You still think I killed Nakamura."

I bent low, looking at the papers the first-years in the room had used to repair the door after their storm five nights ago—the same night Nakamura was killed. None of the papers matched the torn piece from the suicide note—that one was gone. But here were more like it, no doubt, and all signed with the name of the killer.

Kenji walked beside me in silent procession with the other boys as we made our way up the hill toward the baseball field for another clenched-fist ceremony, the second in a week. The lights were off in the faculty dorm, and a sickle moon hung low over the trees:

"Have you proven it was Tetsuo?" Kenji whispered.

I shook my head. "The night of the murder, Nakamura's dorm room was stormed. Tetsuo was there. He led the storm. Two boys have the broken arms and bruised kidneys to prove it."

"But if it wasn't Tetsuo—"

"Something else happened during the storm. When everything was smashed and broken, a stack of letters Nakamura had been hiding were found and scattered all over the floor. No one read them, of course. They were too busy beating first-years with kendo sticks."

Kenji looked to the ground, but I knew he was still listening.

"They were love letters. From an Ichiko boy to Nakamura's sister. She must have given them to her brother. The next morning, when things were put right again, Nakamura's roommates didn't bother to read them either. They just used them like they used all the other papers that had been tossed around the room—to repair the door that had been smashed in the storm."

"On the door," Kenji marveled.

"Yes. You tore the room apart today, looking for those letters, but the proof that you killed Nakamura has been right in front of everyone for four days."

Kenji glanced around, looking for some avenue of escape in the throng of Ichiko boys.

"There is nowhere to go, Kenji."

He looked at me with pleading eyes, but I spoke first.

"He swapped shifts so he could talk to you that night, didn't he? And he brought one of the letters, to show you he had proof."

"He told me to stop seeing her. But how could I, Haruki? I love her! He attacked me. We fought. There was a knife on the counter,



and—it was an accident. You have to understand—”

“But you covered it up. You dragged him out to the edge of the baseball field and made it look like seppuku. It was even easy to clean up, since you were already scrubbing the floors for kitchen duty. But you still needed a suicide note, so you tore a piece off the only paper you had—one of your own love letters. The other half, did I see you burn it? That night I went through the clenched fist?”

“Yes,” Kenji said quietly.

“You were the one who told the Mainstream Society I sneaked out to see a girl, weren’t you? You were the reason I went through the clenched fist.”

“Oh, Haruki. I’m so sorry. You were getting so close. I thought it would make you stop asking questions, but I never expected—” Kenji turned away at the sight of my black and blue face.

“In the end, Kenji, there is only the proof that you were having an affair. I cannot prove that you killed anyone. But I know. And so do all the other students.”

Kenji glanced about madly, but his classmates’ faces betrayed no emotion. He clung to me again.

“I love her, Haruki. I would go through a hundred clenched fists for her. A thousand!”

“You will only have to go through one,” I told him. We reached the baseball field, and a path opened for us to step inside the circle. Six hundred boys stood around the infield, staring at Kenji. All bravado aside, he clutched at my Ichiko jacket.

“For Gods’ sakes, Haruki! Tell them it was all a mistake! Tell them it was Tetsuo, or Moriyama—anybody! We’ve been best friends since middle school!”

I pushed him away.

“Why!?” he pleaded. “Why work so hard for Nakamura? He was a *baka*. He *beat* her, Haruki. He fought with everyone!”

How could I explain? How could I tell Kenji that Nakamura, for all his faults, was the only one to stand up to the insanity of Independence Hall? How could he understand that Nakamura was the only one with any courage, the only one who had given me hope? In his death, I had hoped to find Nakamura’s ultimate revenge—an end to the system he had fought against so hard in the short time he had been here. Instead, he was killed for love, for passion—for the very things the Mainstream Society beat out of Ichiko boys.

Tetsuo was right. Girls were nothing but trouble.

“Kenji Takahashi, step forward!” Tetsuo cried.

“Why, Haruki? Why?” Kenji begged me one last time.

“To honor Ichiko and defend Japan,” I told him, and I turned away as arms and hands dragged him into the circle. ♪

# TRUST ME

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LOREN D. ESTLEMAN

“**E**very cockfight looks pretty much like all the rest, until you get to know it for the sport it is,” Jackie Brill said.

“Football’s a sport,” I said, “and you don’t have to watch a guy mop up blood and feathers at halftime.”

“No, football’s a game. Sport is life and death and taking risks.”

“The roosters take the risks. I like my chickens flame broiled.”

“Trust me on this. I’ve traveled enough in it to write a book on the subject, like that Irish guy that invented bullfighting. Hennessey.”

I lost a beat, and two or three sentences of Jackie’s high-octane pitch, before I realized he’d meant Hemingway. He was a drawn strip of forty-year-old jerky with shoulder-length dirty blond hair, a weatherstock mustache, and blue eyes pickled in scotch—the pizza delivery man in 1970s stag films—whose daily uniform only varied by which color of plaid flannel he wore over his jeans and black Surfaris T-shirt. He belonged to the fifth generation of a family whose fortune had built the Detroit Opera House, the public library on Woodward, and Joe Louis Arena.

His approaching me at Ford Field didn’t increase my chances of making the Social Register that season; his relatives paid him to travel in circles other than theirs. I was only giving him time because I was stuck there until the parking lot cleared, and he’d come over to wait with me in the vacant seat next to mine.

When I’d heard enough about beaks dipped in poison and feed laced with antifreeze—the tricks of the cockfighting trade—I asked what he wanted. With the elaborate care of a proud father, he unshipped a crocodile wallet, stripped off the rubber band that kept it from falling apart, and handed me a Polaroid of the biggest, ugliest rooster this side of Lyle Lovett.

The bird stood straight as a reinforcing rod, glaring through chicken wire at the camera, with its head tilted like a boxer’s and a blood-red comb that flopped to one side like Hitler’s lock. It had a gorilla chest and railroad spikes for spurs.

I gave back the picture. “That’s not a chicken. It’s the love child

of my ex-wife and a California condor. Just out of curiosity, who was on your lunchbox as a kid, Strangler Lewis?"

"I went to Grosse Pointe schools. My lunch was catered." He admired the snapshot, then tucked it away carefully and returned it to his hip. "He's Prince Cortez, out of Montezuma III by Queen Isabella, whose father took top money at the world tournament in Tijuana three years ago. He's just a year old and undefeated in three matches. Think Mike Tyson at eighteen."

"How much you got down on him?"

"Betting's for rubes. I'm buying him outright: two thousand cash."

"He must be a hundred percent white meat."

"I told you, you don't understand the sport. One more win and the price goes to five."

"If he's that good, why's he for sale?"

"His owner's got INS on his neck; something about lying on his visa app about his connections with those Zapatistas a dozen or fifteen years back. He needs juice wherever he can squeeze it. He's overextended."

"So buy the bird. You make that much a week just by staying away from Symphony Hall."

"See, that's why I'm glad I bumped into you. He wouldn't sell Prince Cortez to me for ten grand. I need somebody to carry the pony down to Mexicantown and pick up the goods by proxy."

"What'd you do, sleep with his wife?"

"His daughter." He broke eye contact. "Carmelita's a ripe little peach. I wasn't the first to pick her, but I was the one she expected to stick. When that didn't happen she went to the old man. So now Zorboron's prejudiced against my case."

"Tiger Zorboron?"

"El Tigre del Norte, they call him down in DelRay. His right name's Emiliano. That's like Mac in Mexican."

Jackie's local roots were showing. The old Hungarian section of town, once called DelRay, had been Mexicantown for years, attracting immigrants from south of the border to lay brick and pour mortar so their children could practice medicine and law. There was a gang element among them, of course, promising Old Country justice to new Americans and extracting tribute for the service. Emiliano Zorboron kept the tally.

I stood. The stands were still a quarter full, and the exits from the lot would be jammed tighter than Calcutta, but just then my car seemed a safer place to be. "Forget the prince, Jackie. You can mail order baby chicks by the crate for a lot less than two thousand. Try raising your own champ."

He slouched in his seat, thin as the slats but loose as the peanut sacks blowing about the field. "I heard you had *cojones*."

"If I didn't, I wouldn't worry so much about machetes."

"I'll pay two thousand to deliver two thousand. You went worse places for less for my uncle's law firm. I was brought up soft, but I've been down there a hundred times."

"It's the hundred and first I'm worried about." I left.

He was found in an alley behind a restaurant off West Vernor, the Mexicantown main drag. The cheap trash bag fell apart when a sanitation worker lifted it and Jackie Brill's head rolled out. They'd cut him in six pieces, tucked them together as neatly as Legos, and if they'd used a Hefty Steelsack Jackie might have been buried in a landfill and forgotten, which is the fate of heirs who fall out of favor and vanish.

As it was, he fell back in when his remains were identified. The Grosse Pointe Brills turned the screws on the mayor, the mayor put the squeeze on the chief of police, and the chief cracked the whip on the precinct commanders, who set loose the dogs. The restaurant belonged to a cousin of Emiliano Zorboron's, and even though the cousin lost his English under interrogation, and forgot his Spanish when a Hispanic detective clocked in, street informants were helpful; the story of the Tiger's strained relations with Jackie was known from one end of Vernor to the other. Within twenty-four hours of the discovery of the corpse, Zorboron was under arrest for murder.

Run-of-the-mill homicides don't make the local columns or see airtime. This space-saving policy pays off whenever a Jackie Brill dies under grisly circumstances. He was still on page one and ahead of the first commercial days later, when Mexicantown paid a call to my office.

I leave the door to the reception room unlocked during the day. You never know when loose money might blow in from the street while you're at lunch. The doorknob turned while I was reaching for it, and an Aztec idol invited me inside. He was three hundred fifty pounds stretched out six and a half feet in a Hawaiian print shirt, cargo pants, and what looked like blue fur on his arms but which on closer inspection turned out to be tribal tattoos. His feet were disproportionately small—about size fourteen—in shining loafers, but his head was the size of a temple bell and looked larger still with a bushy mane of black hair combed up and over and down to his collar.

"Aloha," I said.

"*Buenos días*." His bass rumbled like someone rolling a piano

through an empty warehouse. "We've been waiting."

He was big enough to be plural, but when I stepped inside from the hall, a human being who could have sat on his shoulder rose from the upholstered bench. She was about nineteen, olive-tinted, with full lips, eyes as big as the giant's in a head half as large, and black hair hanging loose and glistening to her waist. She wore a white blouse tucked into black slacks cinched by a belt with a heavy silver buckle, cork sandals on her bare feet. She'd have looked appropriate in a mantilla and lace, or a cape made of turquoise, sitting on a sandstone throne.

The season was past for Hawaiian shirts and sandals, but those traditions don't exist in Mexico or its northernmost branch.

"Mr. Walker?" said the woman. "I'm Carmelita Zorboron."

"I was afraid you'd say that. I was hoping you were Dolores, the patron saint of private detectives."

"You're not surprised. My picture has been in the papers and on TV. I'm sure that upsets my father. Before this, the only time his picture was ever published he was wearing a black bandanna across his face and holding a rifle."

"That was him? I thought that Zapatista story was a gag."

"Not to him. He is a proud man. He denied it just once, when he wanted to bring his family to the United States."

I thought she was more Anglicized than she acted. Her accent was too pronounced, her English too careful. But seeing her made me feel better about the hunk of pre-Columbian architecture in my little waiting room. I had an idea she could control him.

"Let's go inside." I rattled my keys. "This half of the building's been unstable since they blew up Hudson's Department Store. Señor Colossus exceeds the load capacity."

"Felipe," rumbled the big man.

"Okay if I call you Flip?" I opened the private door and held it.

He said nothing, hanging back for Carmelita to enter first.

Inside the brain trust he pulled out the customer's chair and hung on until she was perched on the edge. He remained standing while I took my seat behind the desk. There were no other chairs, but he looked as if he'd feel at home sitting Indian fashion on the floor.

"You spoke with Jackie two days before he was killed," the woman said.

"Did I?" I didn't hesitate while taking a cigarette out of the pack.

"You don't have to deny it. I'm not accusing you of anything. One of my father's people saw him at the football game. He saw you talking, and when you left he followed you and got your license plate number. He told me this after my father was arrested. He did not tell the police."

"It wouldn't have looked good for your father if he had. They'd have wanted to know why he was so interested, and who for. Did he happen to overhear this conversation?"

She shook her head. "That is one of the reasons why I am here, to ask you what it was about."

"What does anybody talk about at Ford Field? Someone should sue the team on behalf of real lions for character assassination."

Felipe shifted his weight from one foot to the other, punishing a floorboard.

"Please," Carmelita said.

I blew smoke at the dark spot on the ceiling. "It won't help your father's case."

"Please."

"*Por favor*," said Felipe, without tone.

"I didn't take the job," I said, "so it wasn't privileged communication. He wanted to hire me to buy a fighting cock from Zorboron. Your father wouldn't deal with him."

"Prince Cortez," Carmelita nodded. "Jackie was right. Papa was not pleased with our relationship."

"If he were any less pleased, Jackie'd be cut in twelve pieces instead of six."

"My father did not do that."

"There's not a lot of difference between swinging the machete and giving the order."

"He did not do that either," she said. "If he had, do you not think he would have arranged to be seen engaged in some innocent activity at the time the police think Jackie was murdered?"

I smoked my cigarette in silence. It was a point.

Carmelita lifted her chin. "My father is not an angel. Nor is he a fool. He has no illusions about his daughter's virtue. Even if he had, he would do nothing during his time of trouble with Immigration. He would wait. He has the patience of a hunting cat. That is why they call him *El Tigre*."

"Okay, so you've established reasonable doubt. You'd better get going if you want to convince the rest of the jury pool."

"I want to hire you to find the real killer."

"I don't hunt killers. My specialty's missing persons. The first rule is not to become one."

"You can at least demonstrate that my father was not the only one in Mexicantown who had a reason to kill Jackie."

"Why should I? My books are in good shape right now. One Emiliano Zorboron more or less won't affect the local tax base."

"My father is the one man my people can go to for justice when they are preyed upon by their own. The police file reports and do



nothing. If he is convicted and deported, there will be no one to defend them." She paused, a fist on her thigh, until her breath stopped coming in short, shallow gusts. "I should not need to add that deportation would be a death sentence. The Mexican government tried him in absentia after the Zapatistas failed. His enemies will see to it he does not survive his first six weeks in prison."

I took one last bitter drag—a mistake I make twenty times a day—and mashed out the stub. "Where would I start? Your people don't pour out their secrets for Anglos."

"Talk to my father. He is like a priest, and Mexicantown is his flock. There is no affair so private he does not know it in detail. He will not see me, and I suspect he distrusts Felipe's ability to act upon any information he might give him."

"The justice system has laws against outside competition. If he can open up to me without incriminating himself in another area, he knows the language better than I do. A turnkey would be listening, and he'd wind up with a dozen more charges against him. I'd have to be working for his lawyer in order to arrange a private interview."

Felipe trundled forward and handed me a business card:

FELIPE QUINTAS DE LA MERIDA  
ATTORNEY AT LAW

I ran my thumb over an embossed coat of arms. "You represent Zorboron?"

"Sí. Yes. Since before Carmelita was born."

"Okay, Mr. Merida. I need fifteen hundred to start."

"Felipe?"

The big man nodded and went out. He made very little noise crossing through the reception room. They say elephants walk quietly too. "Where's his briefcase?" I asked Carmelita.

"In his head."

"He could fit the entire Michigan Penal Code in there."

When he returned, Merida was carrying what might have been a medium-size safe by a handle on top. The handle stuck up through a hole in a heavy black cloth that covered the boxlike shape on all sides. When I realized he was about to set it on my desk, I cleared room for it. He hoisted it onto the corner without much effort. It seemed to be a lot lighter than a safe.

"What's in it?"

"Your retainer." He switched off the cloth, startling the thing inside, which made a shrill squawk of a battle cry and hurled itself against the wooden staves that caged it. I shoved away from it as if a snake had struck at me. Merida, who seemed to know his way

around a few things other than torts, made cooing noises until the dervish in the cage stopped whirling and flapping. It stood erect on its newspaper carpet, glaring at me from under its floppy comb with feathers floating down all around.

"His highness, the prince." Carmelita crossed her legs. "You know his worth. Jackie was many things, but he was not a liar."

"I meant cash, not livestock."

"Immigration has frozen all my father's accounts. I wait tables for minimum wage in my cousin's restaurant, the one where Jackie was found." Her throat worked. "Cortez is all I can offer in the way of security."

"Where would I put him? This place only looks like a barnyard until the cleaning service shows up."

Merida said, "He needs sunlight and air and cracked corn. Water. A goldfish is more trouble."

"Keep him. I'm appointing you his conservator."

He dropped the cloth back over the cage, choking off the rooster in the middle of some avian blasphemy.

"You will find him at this address," said the lawyer, writing on the back of another card. "Raul is in charge. Show him this card to collect."

I took it. "I'll need a letter for the cops, confirming I'm acting as your agent. On stationery without the Kentucky Colonel's picture on it."

He produced an envelope from a pocket of his cargo pants. His name and an address on West Vernor were engraved on it in gold and on the computer-printed letter it contained, both good linen stock. His signature might have been written by Prince Cortez. That made him genuine.

Carmelita Zorboron rose and grasped my hand in a fine slim one strung with hidden cable. "Thank you, Mr. Walker. Please report to Flip." Her smile burst like an incandescent bulb and was gone. In a minute she and Merida were as well.

I stared at the door for a while. Then I stared at the window and the wall. I'd bartered my services for jewelry and friendship and debts outstanding. It was bound to come to chickens sooner or later.

"Trust me," I said. "I'm the only one you've talked to in forty-eight hours who doesn't have an axe to grind."

"Felipe told me Carmelita wanted to hire you. I said no. Jail has robbed me of the respect of my servant and my child."

"Yeah, well, what are you gonna do? Up here they don't let you stick them in cages and feed them cracked corn."

I had no idea how that sat with him. Emiliano Zorboron looked as much like a gang leader as Felipe Quintas de la Merida looked like an attorney; small for a tiger, with the cuffs of his orange Wayne County jumpsuit turned back to let his hands poke out, and fine featured to the point of transparency. But when it came to showing what he was thinking, he was as transparent as a drill press. He might have been thirty-five or fifty. His accent was less obvious than his daughter's, which confirmed my suspicion she leaned on hers a little for effect.

We were seated facing each other at a plain maple table in a room reserved for lawyer-client conferences at the jail. I didn't think it was bugged, but just in case, I'd brought along a transistor radio and tuned it in to a gassy talk show to confuse eavesdroppers. RICO and the Patriot Act had danced a flamenco all over the First and Fifth Amendments.

"I had no part in Jackie Brill's death," Zorboron said.

"I'm being paid to believe you, so okay. Who did?"

"Someone with good sense."

"I didn't care for him either, but you've got the best motive so far."

"What does it matter whether they send me home for murder or committing perjury when I applied for my visa? I am sure you know something of my trouble there."

"The immigration beef you can beat, if Merida's half as good as his stationery. Murder's ten times tougher. We got all the killers we need domestic. We can export one now and then."

"Felipe is the best. I paid for his education. We worked side by side in a meatpacking plant in León when we were boys. I trust him with my life."

"Trust me. So far the prosecution has a case, and all he's got is a chicken."

"He had no right to offer you Prince Cortez. I am in here because I refused to let Brill dirty his feathers."

I played with a cold cigarette. You can't smoke in jail now, which is what they call kind and usual punishment. "You're in here because someone dirtied his hands good on Brill. And no one owns a fighting cock, except apparently me. It's illegal."

"That is America. Execute men, but do not abuse fowl." He scratched his chin. He had an eagle tattooed between two fingers so that it opened its wings when he spread his hand. "Speak to my cousin, Nolo Suiz. He may know something."

"The one who owns the restaurant where the body was found?"

"Sí. I do not know if he had dealings with Brill. But I think he thinks I should be frying tortillas and he should be running Mexicantown."



The restaurant was a single story of cinder block, with every square inch of concrete painted gaily and crudely with dancers and bullfighters and vaqueros on horseback, and evidently no name. The same stylized Aztec eagle that Zorboron wore between his fingers spread its wings above the door. In Detroit, you learn to read gang signs like cattle brands, without taking them too seriously. The most notorious band, Young Boys, Incorporated, was mainly a fiction of the late mayor's to derail an investigation into his personal finances.

A middleweight Hispanic in uniform stood in front of the yellow police tape across the entrance. I showed him the letter from Merida, who seemed to be a familiar figure on that detail because he let me duck under and go in without any more foreplay. I passed through a room full of tables and upended chairs and paused inside the swinging kitchen doors to watch a dissection.

A Mexican built along Zorboron's delicate lines, but with coarser features and forearms as big around as melons, quartered a pig on a great butcher-block table in less time than it takes to say it, ambidextrously using a big cleaver to chop bone and a curve-bladed knife to slice sinew. He operated with a surgeon's lack of extraneous motion and made as much noise as a tyrannosaur eating a tenor.

"Nolo Suiz?"

He looked up, startled, with a sharp instrument in each hand and an expression that made me glad I always go armed on a homicide case. The medical examiner had said that whoever had cut up Jackie Brill had known a thing or two about bones and joints.

"¿Quién es?"

"Amos Walker. I'm representing your cousin Emiliano's attorney." I showed him my ID, with the honorary deputy's badge pinned to the bottom of the folder.

"El Tigre don' go to cops. Get out."

I put away the folder and went for another pocket. He raised the cleaver high enough to throw. The Baby Ice Age never moved slower than my hand drawing out Merida's letter. I stepped his way, holding it out. He put down the cleaver to take it but hung on to the knife in his other hand. He read for a long time.

"I don' like Felipe." He gave back the letter.

"If there was a law against hating lawyers, the jails would burst." I put up the letter, letting my coat slide open to show the revolver on my belt. He put down the knife then and mopped his hands on his apron. It looked like a bloody test pattern.

"Who takes out the trash here?" I asked.

"Me, sometimes. Sometimes staff. My cousin, Carmelita. You think she carved up her *hombre*?" He leered.

"It's a thought. She's healthy enough, and if she spent much time in this kitchen she'd know where to make the cuts. Same goes for the rest of the help."

"Me too. Back home I work in a *carniceria* since before I was big enough to lift a side of beef. You think it was me?"

"Not on that evidence. Zorboron told me he worked in a meat-packing plant. Butchering's practically a spectator sport in Mexico. Half the neighborhood's wise to the moves. But the Tiger has a motive, and Jackie Brill turned up in a sack behind your establishment."

"It wasn't even one of my bags. Health Department wouldn't let me use nothing cheap like that."

"If you were dumb enough to use one of your own, you're too dumb to operate your own cash register."

"Dumb enough to dump 'em behind my own place, though."

"You did a good job playing dumb with the cops and ducked an accessory charge. Zorboron and Brill had a bad history. Being related to the owner of the restaurant would make this a comfortable place to make the drop. Nothing dumb about that on your side."

"I don' even know Brill."

"You knew Emiliano didn't like him. Word's out you think you're better qualified to run things than your cousin. Maybe you found a way to vote him off the island."

I'd bet the odds and blew it. He'd seemed more comfortable with the cleaver, so I'd focused my attention on his right hand hovering near it. When the knife flashed into his left fist I made a late backhand swipe and got a nasty cut on the base of my palm. The blade tinkled in a corner, and I drew my weapon.

"Cops wasn't outside, I'd take away that piece and grind you up for a burrito." His big forearms bent at an angle in a wrestler's stance.

"Let's have them in." I held my free hand out to the side, dripping blood. "What's *your* immigration status?"

His face paled beneath the natural pigment. His features were sharper than Zorboron's, rodentlike. "Why shouldn' I run things? I came here six years before Emiliano. I sent him money to come and bring Carmelita. I loaned him money to rent a garage and buy his first rooster. He paid me back with money only. Didn' offer me a partnership in his loan and protection business. Instead he trusts that big donkey Felipe. I am his blood!"

"Speaking of which, you got a Band-Aid?"

He found a kit in a steel drawer. I put away the gun and watched him as I poured on antiseptic and bound my hand in gauze, but he'd spent his wad. INS means TNT in ethnic circles. "So far you've convinced me you wouldn't help your cousin out of a ditch now, much less help him dump a corpse. If he did it alone, he wouldn't choose here and put ammo against him in your hands. Good work, Nolo. Before this, he was clean on just a working basis. You make a better defense lawyer than Felipe."

"I didn' kill this Brill," he said. "I didn' even know what he looked like till I saw his picture on TV."

"I believe you. You'd have deposited the evidence in Zorboron's back yard just to make sure it stuck. Who else hated Brill, or hated Zorboron enough to hang a frame on him?"

"Sister Delia."

That rattled me. So far the case had fathers and daughters and cousins and all of Jackie Brill's relatives. Brothers and pets seemed to be all that was left. "*¿Quién es?*" I said.

"She used to be a nun, but she quit when the old pope died. She runs her own mission now, across from Most Holy Redeemer, and she ain' so Christian about what she thinks of *El Tigre*."

**I** don't know what I expected; a squat old dragon, probably, with a ruler in her fist and a prominent mustache. Sister Delia turned out to be a tall, handsome, horsy-looking woman with bobbed red hair and a grip best suited to a polo mallet. I shook circulation back into my fingers and sat in a shabby but clean armchair in a storefront whose plate-glass windows looked out on the Gothic pile of the church. Her coffee would float the Ark. I bit off a chunk and put cup and saucer on a folding card table.

"I haven't met Señor Merida," she said cheerfully. "If he represents Zorboron, I'm not sure Christ Himself could keep him from the flames."

"That doesn't say much on my behalf. I'm trying to get the Tiger out of the pit."

"You're just misled. The residents of Mexicantown are honest and hardworking—that whole cliché—and they're raising a generation whose accomplishments will establish whole new stereotypes, like the ones Asians enjoy now; as thinkers and innovators. The only thing that can stop them is prejudice. A gangbanger like Zorboron feeds that with every breath he takes."

"You don't think he can be saved?"

"I don't. That's where I parted with the Vatican. I stayed on from loyalty, but when the guard changed I got out. Cock fights;



can you think of any symbol more demeaning to a people?"

"He isn't in for that."

That didn't pierce her armor. She sat in a cracked plastic scoop chair with her long legs crossed in pleated slacks. The mission seemed to be a place where the poor and homeless came in from the weather to thaw their veins with hot soup and that nerve-shredding coffee and listen to Scripture in Spanish. It was a nice day, and we had it all to ourselves.

"His daughter thinks he was set up," I said. "I think so too. Did you know Jackie Brill?"

"He tried to rent this building for his filthy exhibition," she said. "When I said no, he offered me a cut of the take. He spouted some nonsense about having to get to know it for the sport it is. He left when I threatened to call the police."

"He made me the same pitch."

"You see what I'm talking about? Zorboron's plague has spread to the white suburbs. He's the worst thing to happen to the Chicano image since Pancho Villa."

"You're not Chicano, are you?"

Her smile chilled the steam off my coffee. "I'm one of those white liberal meddlers you hear so much about; the people the KKK hate more than themselves. What about you?"

"Just a meddler. When did Brill approach you?"

"Last week. If you think I killed him and cut him up and dumped him at Zorboron's door, thank you for the compliment. I'm not that devious, but if I were I'd have done it just for the way Brill treated Carmelita. She's a sweet girl."

"You know her?"

"Everyone knows everyone here. Most of them came from the same three villages. Sooner or later they all showed up at Most Holy Redeemer."

"Did she go there to confess?"

"Technically, I can't say. I never saw her use a booth."

"Technically, bees can't fly," I said. "Let's put that word aside."

"A doctor knows medicine, but a nurse knows patients. It's the same with priests and nuns. People would trust me with things they'd never tell the father. I won't violate that just because I no longer wear the habit."

"You'd make a good lawyer."

The smile evaporated. "These days anyone can be a lawyer; anyone at all. Being a nun takes *cojones*."

I had everything now but a motive, and I could guess at that. It was some kind of record for me in an investigative quagmire like

murder. But it's a small community, where events take place in closer order than they do out in the world. I called Felipe Quintas de la Merida and agreed to meet him and Carmelita in his office.

It was above a garage around the corner from Nolo Suiz's restaurant, close enough to smell the hot grease and cilantro. Merida's diploma hung in a frame on imitation wood paneling behind an easy-assembly desk. I figured the second door led to his living quarters. Today he wore a lightweight gray suit off the big-and-tall rack and a dark blue shirt-and-tie set that made him look like a bouncer in one of the better strip clubs north of the county line. Carmelita, in a yellow dress and open-toed pumps, sat facing me on the customer's side with her hair up. She looked drawn, and pretty as end of day.

"Nice setup," I said. "What goes on downstairs?"

Merida didn't stir behind his desk. "They fix cars. We don't stage cockfights in Mexicantown anymore. It's become a suburban sport."

"Outsourcing. Very American. I don't guess Jackie Brill made himself any more popular than always when he tried to reintroduce it to the neighborhood."

Carmelita perked up. "He did? Do you think that's why he was killed?"

"No, it was over you. The police are right about that."

She drooped.

"Who told you Brill wanted to do that?" asked the lawyer.

"Sister Delia."

I'd picked a spot where I could watch both their reactions. Merida's face was an adobe wall. Carmelita's fell apart in little pieces. I decided to start with her.

"He tried to cut a deal to use her mission," I said. "She was a hard sell. She's not exactly an aficionado, but she was even less inclined because of you. You were a lot more forthcoming with her than you were with me. All I knew was you and Brill had a history."

She gripped the arms of her chair. "She swore she wouldn't—"

Merida broke in. "You covered a lot of ground in a day."

"It isn't Acapulco. You can do the place in an hour." I was still looking at the young woman.

"It was a scare," she said before the lawyer could speak again. "I was—late. He offered to make all the arrangements. He insisted. He said he'd pay for everything. I reminded him I'm a Catholic. He threatened me. He was terrified, I could see that. He knew Papa would kill him if he found out."

"Carmelita—" Merida began.

"Did he hit you?"

"No. He was afraid to go that far." The pieces came back together. She was the Tiger's child. "But you know that, if you spoke with Sister Delia."

"She kept your confidence. I've been working this job since before you were born. I get the most I can out of what little I get."

"*¡Bruto!*" Merida's face showed color for the first time. "She's your client, not a defendant on trial."

"They're all on trial until I separate them from their lies and omissions. She held back the pregnancy because she knew it was the best motive on earth for a father to kill an unwanted suitor. She said it herself; that's why Brill was desperate to terminate it on the q.t. What happened?"

"It was a false alarm," she said. "I was just—late. But the episode determined me to end the relationship." Her accent was softer now. She'd given up on playing the heiress apparent.

"That explains how he found the grit to go ahead and try to buy Prince Cortez through me. It also leaves only one person with reason enough to kill Jackie and the skill to process him like prime rib." I looked at Mérida. "Sister Delia said anyone can be a lawyer. She wasn't speaking generally, was she?"

"*Cuidado, amigo.*" The big man's tone was at low idle. "You're coming close to grounds for action."

"I've been sued before," I said, "if that's the action you mean. You've got the doublespeak down, but you'll never be a successful criminal attorney if you think the cops are dumb enough to arrest Zorboron's cousin just because you ditched the body behind his restaurant. You were loyal enough to the Tiger to try to implicate his most outspoken rival; but that would just be a collateral benefit, wouldn't it? How long have you been in love with Carmelita?"

He laughed. The noise lacked resonance of his speech and had a nasty little rattle in it.

"Felipe?" Carmelita was staring at him.

"Remain calm. He swings his machete in the dark." It had the sound of an Old Country saying.

"No good, Flip. She knows. I knew, too, but I was too busy being sure Zorboron was guilty to read anything into the little things like the way you hold doors and chairs for her. Sister Delia knew because Carmelita told her. There's no other explanation for why she'd drag out that remark about lawyers when the subject came up."

"Felipe." She wasn't questioning him now. The syllables came out in a slow snarl of accusation.

I said, "You and Emiliano worked in the same meatpacking plant when you were kids. You never forget your first job or how to do it."

The desk erupted, coming up and over and almost clipping me

before I could jump out of my chair. I knew he'd have strength, but I'd misjudged his speed. But Carmelita was slower to react. The near edge of the desk landed in her lap and the momentum threw her chair over onto its back with her still in it. She screamed, a clear, bell-like, south-of-the-border cry like you only hear now in old movies about lusty banditos and dancing señoritas, drowned out before it hit its peak by a horrified roar as Merida saw what he'd done and lunged across the desk to catch it before it pinned her to the floor.

He made it with an inch to spare and time for me to draw down on him where he stood clutching the heavy piece of furniture with his great arms strained to the limits of their tendons.

**W**e sat on the stoop in front of the door to his office, which belonged to the garage above which Felipe Merida had practiced law until yesterday. Zorboron conducted business inside only when rain or cold prevented him from making high-interest loans and promises from that concrete pedestal sprayed all over with graffiti in Spanish. I was in my shirtsleeves, the Tiger in a black T-shirt that showed raw muscle stretched over bone with no flesh to spare. The day was warm, not precisely Indian summer because we hadn't had a frost yet, but nice enough for two acquaintances to drink Dos Equis from the bottle on the street, knowing there wouldn't be many like it for a long time.

"He was the friend of my youth," he said. "He should have told me of his intentions toward my daughter."

I said, "He hadn't any, apart from mooning around in her orbit until she found someone closer to her age and type. You'd have taken even that away if he'd opened his mouth."

"Yes, but he should have showed me the respect. Carmelita is different. She tells me nothing and I know less."

"Congratulations. That makes you an American dad. She knew how he felt without his having to tell her. Women are born with that talent, both sides of the Rio Grande."

"Poor Felipe. I would help him if it were not for my problems with Immigration."

"He's confessed. He'll get off with less than a life sentence if Brill's rich relatives stay out of it. I think they've made all the noise they're going to. He's off their hands, and they don't have to pay him any more to keep him off."

He swigged beer. "I cannot even reimburse you."

"We're square. I've got Prince Cortez, don't forget. I don't think you're stupid enough to fight him with Uncle Sam watching, and

he'll be past his prime by the time you jump through the last hoop in Washington."

"Will you fight him?" He looked at me. It was the first time I'd seen his eyebrows move more than a bubble off level.

I scratched my hand. The cut was starting to heal. "I spend most of my day in a sweaty little room. I don't want to spend my nights in one. My building super has family out in farm country. His Highness can perch on a fence and annoy the neighbors at sunrise."

"You are an animal lover?"

"Only the ones with fur and cold noses. I thought about eating him, but he's too stringy."

"I do not see the profit to you."

"I told your daughter at the start my books are in good shape. I got some sun and found good takeout across the street. I don't think I want to eat in your cousin's place. He told me he grinds the meat for his burritos. Authentic Mexican cooks shred theirs."

"He is Bolivian on his father's side." Zorboron chipped at the label on his bottle with a manicured thumb. "I, too, am disenchanted with the spectacle of birds mauling one another for the entertainment of imbeciles. It does not suit a man of standing in his community. I will be disappointed if after all you have said you take advantage of my withdrawal to mount an enterprise of your own."

"You'll have to trust me on that."

"This thing I will do." He offered me the hand with the tattoo. We shook. ♫

## THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

T UQC LQZ WVNQ, DVPQZNWFQZ. QFQV CLWDOL T  
RVQG GLKC ALQ GKA DX CW, KBCQZ CQV UTVDCQA  
T'P LKFQ OTFQV LQZ CLQ PQQP CW UI LWDAQ.  
—VKWUT MQSS

CIPHER:

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

*Solution on page 83*

# STEP ON A CRACK

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DAVID EDGERLEY GATES

**I**t's said things come in threes, a run of good luck at cards, a run of bad luck in love. But the penny doesn't always drop until the third time around. The first event might be something you don't take much notice of. The second thing seems somehow familiar, even if you can't quite put a name to it. But come the third time, you snap your mental fingers and tell yourself, *I knew that.*

Benny Siegel had been dead a year now. The story was that Benny's murder had been sanctioned at a meeting of the capos in Havana—they met in Cuba because it was the closest Lucky Luciano could get to the States—but there was another tale altogether making the rounds, which was that Benny had been sidelined by an unnamed third party, not connected with the mob at all. In any event, the murder of Bugsy Siegel wasn't the important thing decided or not in Havana. Luciano, living in Sicily, was moving poppy from Turkey to the heroin refineries in Marseilles. He wanted to open the American market.

The old-time bosses like Frank Costello and Joe Adonis had always held out against the drug trade. They didn't see what me sainted Da would have called the hand-wringing on the wall. What happened in late '48 and early '49 was the beginning of the end of the old order, although none of us saw it coming. A couple of years later, when Costello was up in front of Kefauver's committee, blinking in the glare of the television lights, a lot of us were scurrying from subpoenas. But that was after.

It all started to come apart with the dock strike in 1948. What you might call the law of unintended consequences.

Mind you, this wasn't how it seemed at the time, and to tell you the truth, my concerns were otherwise engaged.

"Mickey," Young Tim Hannah says to me. "I've a job of work for you."

This was nothing out of the ordinary, as I'd been in the service of the Hannah syndicate since the Armistice of 1918, starting out as a wee lad carrying policy slips and working my way up to bare





knuckles for Old Tim, the boss as was, who'd run the West Side rackets for thirty years. He'd died the previous Christmas, and his son took the miter. They say you could see the white smoke coming up from Jack Sharkey's when Young Tim was elevated to his father's place.

"I need you to broker an accommodation," he began, but then he hung fire, seeming oddly reticent to go on, as if it might be awkward or embarrassing.

I said nothing, since I had no notion where he was headed. "I want to make an approach to Desmond Morrissey," he said, bringing it out all at once, sort of breathless.

My jaw went slack. Des Morrissey was a fire-breathing Fenian of the deepest dye, a man whose tribal memory went back to the Battle of the Boyne and beyond, to Cromwell, to the torment of Ulster under the Tudors. He was an IRA bagman and was rumored to be a gunrunner, but I could imagine him making no possible accommodation with the criminal class. We were, in his view, contemptible, the worst kind of assimilated Irish, who took tainted money and preyed on our own.

"Arrange a meeting for me," Young Tim said. "A social occasion, if at all possible. This doesn't require muscle. I'd like to try and gain the man's confidence."

There was something in this I didn't feature, and Young Tim obviously wanted me to work blind. He'd never trust me with a commission that gave me the edge on him. As a holdover from his father's day, he didn't reside full confidence in me. But he knew I was loyal to my own people and would never fall in with the Italians, God help us all, or the darkies. I smelled a devious purpose here, although not necessarily a wicked one.

"It's a matter of some delicacy, Mickey," he said.

I wasn't a delicate man, but I didn't have to remind him.

Now, at this time, I was what the Italians call a *caporegime*, a lieutenant. I ran a crew of my own. It wasn't all strong-arm stuff, although that's what I had a name for. Much of it was simple fetch and carry, going back to my early days in the numbers, even if these days the lads reported to me, and I was the hardcase they lived in fear of. But we learn from our struggles, and my discipline was never arbitrary, only necessary. We'd come up in a rough school. People like to pretend they're removed from violence, but I never saw a choice. It simply wasn't offered.

If this seems something off the point, I should explain that the character of a man like Des Morrissey was similar to mine, although I'm sure he'd be one to give you an argument. We

answered to different necessities, but we both recognized the fact of our obligation. Morrissey's discipline was political, a cause other men had bled and died for, as Des would be the first to tell you. My livelihood was less priestly but no less *round* and no less genuine. There was more ambiguity to it, I grant you; Morrissey's devotion admitted of no ambiguity. I will say, though, that I admired Des Morrissey's ferocity, even though I felt it misguided. It lacked self-interest, and I find an abundance of self-disregard suspect.

Be that as it may, I presented myself at Morrissey's door. Not his townhouse, mind you, but what he styled his office. The townhouse was uptown, on Riverside Drive near Grant's Tomb, but the office was a storefront social club in Hell's Kitchen, the Auld Sod, after a fashion, where both Irish Republicans and the Hannah mob still found willing recruits. Morrissey had named his enterprise after that recalcitrant old rascal John Devoy, a stern model, but going inside, I found it had much the flavor of a Tammany ward heeler's.

There were widows and war veterans, out-of-work laborers and bored punks, loafers, hangers-on, and drunks. A catalogue of the unfortunate, the deprived, and the dispossessed, every one with a story to tell and their hand out. Altogether, there was that air of favors sought and favors given. I felt right at home.

This was, of course, simply the outer circle of petitioners at Morrissey's court.

There were others, some of whom strode indifferently past the human debris in the anteroom, some of whom scurried, hoping to pass unnoticed. The better-dressed men were there to offer influence, or buy it, and they had easy *entrée*. The ferrets were informers and dogsbodies. It was exactly like Young Tim Hannah's. Any organization is lubricated by patronage and by a working knowledge of the street. If you went to City Hall and waited an audience with Hizzoner, the silver-haired Bill O'Dwyer himself, you'd find the same mix of condescension and despair, better packaged, perhaps, but the need just as raw. Here at Des Morrissey's, you found the bottom of the barrel.

This was political power at its most intimate. These were the utterly disenfranchised. Tammany could buy an individual vote for a glass of whiskey, but what was the need when whole precincts were for sale? The mob took no interest in them, they were only background, people who'd already been squeezed, too poor to be squeezed any further. The Church had abandoned them to their fate because fate it was, the destiny they deserved, or how else would it have overcome them? There were few social services to cushion these luckless souls from the



indifferent brutality of merchant capitalism. They'd fallen through the cracks. And here was Des Morrissey sweeping them up, answering their needs, looking for the occasional diamond in the rough, an angry, underfed man he might shape to his own importunate ends.

I would have waited my turn with the rest, but somebody had taken notice of me. Whether it was the cut of my clothes or the cut of my jib, I must have seemed somehow out of place. A quiet boy materialized at my side and asked if I had business with Morrissey. He was polite and soft spoken, with the lilt of Derry in his voice, but I knew him for what he was, one of Des Morrissey's hard fellas, not long off the boat, who'd learned his trade in the slums of Belfast. You'd think there was no shortage of muscle to be picked up here in New York, but the IRA were a mistrustful bunch, even of their own, and this one was a minder, dispatched from the mother country to keep Des Morrissey true to the cause. An unnecessary precaution, I imagined.

Des would know me, I told the boy.

He looked apologetic. "Would you be carrying a weapon?" he inquired.

Aye, that I would.

"We'll step in here, where it's more private."

He let me go first, a sensible courtesy, since he then had me boxed in. It was a small room, no bigger than a closet, with two others before me and him behind. I allowed them to search me, taking the Colt from my shoulder holster, the weighted sap from my hip, and the straight razor from its leather-lined pocket at the small of my back. I could have gone unarmed to my meeting with Des, but that would have confused them.

The boy from Londonderry safed the Colt I always carried cocked and locked. "Thirty-eight Super, long-slide," he remarked. He slipped the magazine out, and his eyes narrowed when he saw the jacketed hollow-points with their copper plugs.

"Ankle holster," I said to him.

He nodded to the other two, and they patted me down for the second time. This time they found the little hideout auto.

"Kraut gun," the boy from Londonderry said. "7.65 Luger."

He was speaking to himself, not to me, half smiling. "I had one of these once. Very reliable. Germans know good work."

The IRA had taken money and guns from the Nazis during the war. I decided I wouldn't bring it up.

"What do we call you?" the boy asked me.

"Mickey Counihan," I said. "It's my name. What do we call you, then?"

"Oh, make it Paddy," he said. "We're all Paddys, here."

"Ain't it the trut'," I said, mimicking his accent. But of course it wasn't quite the truth. We were all Paddys, right enough. We would have killed each other for our socks. The boy from Londonderry knew full well what I meant.

The two who'd missed my backup gun the first time had it in mind to handle me roughly, out of embarrassment, but the boy gave them a soft glance, up from under, and they retreated like the tide. He had them disciplined.

I was ushered into the presence.

The back office was neat, if cramped, paneled in a light bleached chestnut that had darkened with age and tobacco smoke. But there were tall casement windows that gave on a tenement courtyard in the rear, and at that hour of the day some sunlight refracted in, giving the wood some warmth.

There was no warmth in Des Morrissey's gaze.

His eyes were dark, set deep under a slab of brow. His hair was black and curly, perhaps the legacy of some forgotten Spanish mariner, when the Armada, stormwrecked, crashed on Ireland's shore. He was a big man, almost as big as me, thick through the chest, with lungs for powerful oratory, but when he spoke now, his voice was a low growl. Pushing sixty, he still had a banked, feral energy that radiated physical authority, and no little menace.

"State your errand," he said.

Now, his use of the noun *errand* was calculated to put me in my place. It may even have been unconscious, although I doubted Des did anything without thinking it through. On the other hand, I had no clear idea of what my errand *was*, and I had no reason to take offense.

Feigning patience, he leaned against the front of his desk, folding his arms. "Words fail you?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Just getting them in order."

"Oh, it's a verbatim message, is it?"

"No," I told him again. "The words are my own. The sense of it is Tim Hannah's, though, right enough."

"Spit it out, then."

It wasn't just the two of us. The hard-eyed lad from Derry had taken up station at my back to protect his master. Or was Des really master here? I wondered. It was the girl who'd caught my attention, although I tried not to let my interest show. She was sitting behind the desk, studying me, silent as death itself, her expression watchful. There was a calculating intelligence in her look that made me uneasy, as if my worth had already been weighed, and found wanting.

"Here's a fine broth of a boy, Rose," Des Morrissey said to her. "A sheep in wolf's clothing, you might say."

"He'd benefit from a shearing," the boy from Derry put in.

If I hadn't mistaken him, it was a gelding he meant.

But then the girl unexpectedly spoke up. "Was it County Antrim your people came from, then, Dermot?" she asked. "I've heard that in the more benighted small holdings about Lough Neagh, farm-boys castrate the young rams with their teeth." Her voice was husky and her tone languid, almost amused, but there was a silken edge to it, like steel drawn across a whetstone. "Is that exaggeration, or were you wanting a mouthful of balls?"

Des cut a look at her but held his peace.

"Michael James Counihan," she said, turning her unwelcome attentions to me. Her eyes were the color of slate, like dirty weather. *Girl*, of course, was an inadequate description. She was deceptively slight, perhaps no more than a hundred pounds in wet clothing, but I now put her at a few years above twenty. Her hair had the same thick, dark, ungovernable profligacy as her father's (because I'd realized who she was, and thought myself a fool for not seeing it before); her skin as translucent as porcelain, with the blush of strong emotion giving her an innocence Des had lost over the years, his complexion thicker, coarsened with too much necessary compromise; and the selfsame flame burning inside her, fierce enough to purify all doubts. I felt awkward, faced with such unwavering certainty.

"You've yet to explain yourself," Des reminded me, bringing my thoughts to heel.

"Tim Hannah wants a sit-down," I told him.

"Whatever for?" Rose Morrissey asked.

I shrugged. "To discuss matters of mutual interest, I'd imagine," I said. "It's my understanding that your father and Old Tim, himself that was, were agreed on what you might call an *entente cordiale*, less partisan than pragmatic."

Rose smiled, tilting her head to one side. "*Entente*?" she inquired. "Your vocabulary doesn't quite suit your manner. I'm thinking you have unexplored possibilities, Mr. Counihan."

"My manner suits the streets, Miss Morrissey," I said. "My vocabulary comes from the company of my betters."

Rose Morrissey grinned. "We're all equals here," she said without irony.

I didn't believe that for a moment; and neither did her dad or young Dermot. There was a dynamic at work I didn't fathom.

"I never took blood money," Des Morrissey said stiffly. He turned from his daughter to me. "Nor do I mean to start now, with



the squalid leavings of cutpurses and pimps."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Des," I burst out. "It's *all* blood money. You've got your fingerprints on dozens of killings." I jerked my head over my shoulder at Dermot. "Who supplies them with weapons to ambush the *Garda*? When they gun down Prods or backsliders or their political rivals, whose name is on the bullet? There's a coffee can in every Irish bar in New York by the cash register to put your change in for the brave lads."

I felt Dermot stir dangerously behind me. "The brave lads." I hawked a gob on the floor. "Cowards, hiding behind a cause, any excuse for mayhem. At least I admit I'm in it for preferment."

I'd gone too far, but my blood was up, and I'd warned Young Tim, after all, that I wasn't a temperate man.

And a curious thing happened. Des and I were at daggers drawn, the boy from Derry behind me ready to strangle me with my own shoelaces, and then Rose stood up.

It was no easy matter. She struggled, using her arms and her upper body, forcing herself out of the chair, leaning across the desk for leverage. Her face was swollen with effort, and sweat leaked from her hairline, but she recovered her composure. I could see her father ached for her.

"Factionalism," she whispered, hoarsely, her breath rasping in her throat. "Enmity, history, tribal feuds." Her voice was getting stronger now, fueled by righteousness. "We have *common cause*."

She was holding herself up with her elbows locked. I saw the chair she'd been sitting in had casters on its feet, like Roosevelt's. Her legs were withered, from childhood polio, perhaps, or a car accident, a spinal injury that had left them useless. She was a cripple. Fury kept her standing, black fury with herself, with her weakness, fury with our intransigence.

"History," Rose said, stilling herself to calm, "is a trap. If we use our hatreds to fuel our differences, we're lost. We need the lessons of the past, but we need to put them to use, to undermine the class warfare that pits us against one another."

It sounded like an argument she'd made before.

"I'll not make common cause, as you choose to call it, with thugs such as Tim Hannah," her father snapped.

"I'd like to make that choice for myself," Rose said. "Why not hear what he has to say?"

"Look at this bully-boy," Des retorted with a contemptuous gesture in my direction. "*He's* what you'd get in bed with."

"I hear Tim Hannah wears better suits," Rose said. "I mean you no offense, Mr. Counihan," she added, smiling demurely.

I said nothing, but my smile in return was complicit.

"The likes of Tim Hannah aren't the oppressors," Rose said to her father. "The oppressor is capital, working hand in glove with a political system that feeds on its own corruption."

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Des muttered, capitulating. He glared at me, hot with anger. "Name a place," he said. "I mean to bring my daughter. Is that proof against assassination?"

I shouldn't have been startled that personal risk entered into Des Morrissey's calculations, but I was fairly sure murder wasn't on Young Tim's mind. "You name the place," I said. "And name wherever you like." I glanced back over my shoulder at Dermot. "I'll answer for your safety and that of your daughter, if you'll answer for mine and Tim Hannah's."

"Done," Des said. He spat in his hand and we shook on it.

**Y**ou might suppose that my fit of temper had done me no good with the Morrissey clan, but in point of fact I'd learned two things of value, perhaps three, although whether I could put them to use was another matter entirely. First of all, I now had a better idea of what Young Tim was up to, and at first blush it seemed daft enough. He'd set his cap for Rose. Whether he hoped for a love match as well as a dynastic marriage was of no importance. And he'd picked me for the simplest of reasons. It made his approach appear to be the offer of a gangland truce.

The second thing I'd discovered was at odds with the first. Rose Morrissey was animated by a different passion altogether.

I met Johnny Darling for a drink at a bar near the edge of Chinatown. It was close enough to the financial district, where he worked, but far enough off the beaten path for him not to be noticed. It would do him no credit to be seen with me, although Johnny would have brushed that aside like the gent he was. We'd done each other a service or two in what you might call another lifetime, but in the normal course of things our paths no longer crossed. Johnny wasn't in the rackets, which is why I'd sought him out. He was the only person I could trust. Nothing we said would find its way to somebody's long ears on the West Side.

I asked about his wife, of course, but he knew it wasn't a simple social occasion, and I got down to cases, telling him what I knew about Des Morrissey's active political sympathies, and trying to explain Tim Hannah's curious overture, both in method and what I took to be his object. Johnny heard me out, putting one or two pertinent questions, but by and large letting me shape the narrative.

He nodded when I was done and ordered us another round of drinks. "*Sláinte*," he said, smiling, raising his glass.

We clicked rims. Nobody in my family had spoken Gaelic for three generations.

"I don't doubt your instincts, Mickey, but it seems kind of a reach," he said. "Montagues and Capulets."

"You haven't seen her," I said.

"Rose Morrissey." He turned his glass on the bar, thinking it over. "Your guess is she and Tim Hannah have already met."

"That's my suspicion."

"When would they have had such an opportunity?"

"Thursday night Bingo at Saint Xavier's, for all I know," I said. "I haven't worked out the details. I'm telling you what I felt in that room. Rose Morrissey has good reason to see this through. Her father has no idea."

"Well, fathers so often don't," he remarked.

This wasn't a line of talk I wished to pursue. Johnny's own father was a dangerous man whose enmity I'd managed to richly earn. "I mean that her father sees her through his own eyes," I said. "Perhaps a victim of circumstance, who knows? I do know he doesn't see her as a sexual creature."

Johnny sat back. "A sexual creature?" He grinned. "You surprise me, Mickey. I thought the Irish imagined all women to be virgins or whores, with nothing in between, but you're saying Morrissey's daughter has honest desires?"

"Ach, take a flying leap at the moon, you barstid," I said.

"You're all the same, bleeding Episcopalians, winking at sin."

"Sodom and Begorrah," Johnny said, lifting his whiskey.

We clicked glasses again.

"There's something else about Rose," he suggested.

I'd told him she was lame. Johnny himself had a piece of Japanese shrapnel in his left leg, which left him with a limp. I'd been using him as a sounding board to put my thoughts in order, but now I was venturing into deeper waters.

"Tim Hannah's mob and the IRA," I said.

"Montagues and Capulets?"

"A marriage of convenience, certainly," I told him, "even if Des Morrissey can't see it, or abide it. He's got a hard boy for muscle, name of Dermot, but our lad Dermot looks to be less in Morrissey's employ or under his discipline than he appears to be the eyes and ears of the Emerald Isle."

"The military wing of Sinn Fein."

I nodded. Johnny was quick.

"So, what you're suggesting is that Morrissey would resist the match for personal reasons and for reasons of principle, but the men Dermot represents would see an advantage in it." He sat

forward. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"I've no one else to tell," I said. It was the truth.

He circled back, as I expected he would. "What is it about Rose Morrissey, then?"

"I can't penetrate her motives."

"Easy enough to fathom, I'd imagine," he remarked, smiling. "A girl who wears the shamrock on her sleeve."

"I was thinking more Red than Green," I said.

I'd thrown him a curve, and it took him a moment to recover his aplomb. "You're not serious," he said.

"Do you know any Communists personally?" I asked him.

He stared at me in pure astonishment. I should explain that Johnny came from money; his family was in railroads and an abiding power on Wall Street. He shrugged. "Sure," he said. "A few Parlor Pinks. People who voted for Henry Wallace. Hell, my dad still thinks Roosevelt was a tool of Stalin."

"No, the real thing," I said.

He waved it away. "You know there's a Red Scare," he said. "There's *always* a Red Scare, in my circles."

"Not just in yours," I said.

He saw I was in earnest. "What are you saying?" he asked.

"Rose spoke of common cause, of the villainy of capital, of a corrupted polity. She's got the heat of the committed."

"You think she's a Bolshie." A statement, not a question.

"I didn't say she was in the pay of the Kremlin."

"No, but you'd say she had a thirst for social justice, and her father's trapped in the past, with no eye for the future."

"A thirst for social justice is no bad thing," I said.

Johnny smiled. "I'm in no position to argue," he said. He was one to wear his privilege lightly.

"As for her dad," I said, "I'd agree he's fighting a battle that's already been decided."

"Did he win or lose?"

"Ach," I said, "that's the argument. If it were up to Des, he'd rewrite history."

"That's a fair description of a Stalinist," Johnny said.

I didn't take his meaning.

"Des Morrissey's a rigid man," Johnny said. "His daughter appears to have inherited that, from what you say, if not his politics in the strictest sense. Beware orthodoxy, Mickey." He grinned. "It's all snake oil, to keep the rich in power."

"The rich keep the rich in power," I said.

"Our secret's out, then," Johnny said cheerfully.



The third matter of business, the one I said I wasn't so sure of, was our friend Dermot's place in the scheme of things. I'd offered it to Johnny as a certainty, but I think that was mostly to make a weak tale more convincing.

Be that as it may, I reported back to Tim Hannah.

He was keyed up and eager, but once he learned that Des Morrissey had agreed in principle to the meeting, protocols yet to be determined, he seemed overtaken by lassitude, as if his former nervous energy were only a function of his anxiety that I'd fail in my errand, and when I proved successful, all the wind went out of his sails. I volunteered the intelligence that it was Rose Morrissey, not her father, who'd closed the deal.

His reaction was studied and overcareless. "Ah," he said, "she's something of a beauty, I'm told."

"She has a sharp mind and a sharp tongue," I remarked.

"Well, we don't all look for a pliant woman, Mickey," Young Tim said, sort of sly-like.

"Pliant" was far from the word I'd use to describe Rose. I wondered, as Johnny had, how they'd met. I was sure they had.

He nodded to himself, as if confirming something he'd known already. "I don't doubt she's got a mind of her own," he said.

"I'd say she was the brains of the outfit."

"Would you? And why's that?"

"Des knows tactics. He's a street fighter, by preference, and a politician only by default. Rose has an eye for the grand scheme. She understands strategy, not just stratagems."

Tim gave me a chilly stare. "Perhaps she's need of both," he remarked. He'd said nothing about her withered legs. I took it the subject wasn't to be discussed, or not directly.

"Des has a hard boy from Belfast keeping an eye on things," I told him. "A minder for the Provisionals."

"Keeping an eye on Des, you mean," Young Tim said. He knew where the land lay.

"He might be Rose's creature, to some degree."

A sudden fury suffused Tim Hannah's face, but it was just as quickly suppressed. I should have realized he'd find a rival in Dermot. "To what degree?" he asked me acidly.

I beat a retreat. "They have little enough in common," I remarked. "But it's my impression Rose wears the pants. Des is a front. This lad takes his instructions from the girl, not her father."

Young Tim seemed to subside. "Find out what you can about their relationship," he said. "Better to begin a negotiation in full knowledge than with the cup half empty."

Which was all the encouragement I needed.



On the West Side, as I've said, there were two factions vying for influence, the Hannah mob and Des Morrissey's patriots. But there was a third orbit, the longshoremen and dockworkers along the piers, whose loyalties were mixed. I went down to the river to test the waters.

In my father's day, the stevies on the West Side docks were Irish to a man, just as the East Side docks were worked by the Italians, but because of the war, there'd been a lot of mix and match, and the former ethnic solidarity had been fragmented. Greeks, Yugoslavs, Russians, Hunkies and Polacks, Dutchmen and Jews, you name it, even Negroes—a man who swung a baling hook could find work. Then, as now, it was a closed shop, jobs handed down from father to son, but these days the term was freighted with a different meaning. The docks were union. Scabs were beaten bloody, and there was no second chance. You'd be thrown into the river if you showed up again, likely to be ground to pulp between the pilings and the shifting steel hulls.

It was an unforgiving environment, peopled by a tough crowd.

But as it developed, labor's very strength was its Achilles' heel.

I was talking up an old soak named Dunratty, not a Hannah informer so much as anybody's who'd cross his palm with money for drink. Dunratty was unreliable, passing along a deal of gossip, much of it the purest moonshine, but he had an ear to the ground nonetheless. I'd already taken note of two hardcases of the Italian persuasion, wearing suits and ties, pearl gray fedoras, and cashmere topcoats—not your usual uniform on the waterfront. Costello's mob had been making inroads on the docks since before the war. I asked Dunratty what he thought.

"Barstids, them dagos," he remarked, although without much heat. It was a commonly held opinion among the Irish, but it told me nothing about why Costello's button men would be making themselves so visible. "They been around since talk of a strike begun," Dunratty volunteered.

This was news. Strike? I hadn't heard of any grievances.

Dunratty gave me the look he'd give a wittol. "Ach, for Christ's sake, Mickey, are the Hannahs losing their grip? The Italians smell a change in the weather and look after their own interest."

I didn't follow.

"The damn waterfront's up for grabs," Dunratty said, losing patience with me for not seeing the obvious.

I slipped him a fin, and left him to his own devices. What I needed was a less anecdotal reading, or a more partisan one.

The union hall was down a few blocks and over two on Tenth.

Avenue, but I didn't think it would suit my purpose. At this hour of the day, all I was like to find was some gimped-up old stevie

**T**he docks were union. Scabs were beaten bloody, and there was no second chance. sweeping cigarette butts out from under the chairs. Not that such a one might not repay a little time invested, but I had the

feeling time wasn't to be carelessly spent. There was a flavor of hurry in the air, the feral scent of angry men.

I went looking for Gyp O'Fearn. My interest in finding him was twofold. Gyp was a shop steward in the dock union and would know of any discontents. Secondly, he was a man of fixed loyalties, not one to be swayed by empty promises. He held the hard-won gains of the working class in trust. If there were a struggle for control of the waterfront, Gyp O'Fearn was like to be in the thick of the fight.

And so it proved.

After at first getting a few blank looks—some of which might well have been willed ignorance, the clannishness of the docks, unready to trust strangers—I was eventually directed over to Pier 86, just below the passenger terminal, where a crew was off-loading cargo pallets from a Dutch-flagged freighter. I noticed, though, that the ship's home port, stenciled on her stern, was Abidjan, the Ivory Coast, which wasn't a country of tulips and wooden shoes. And there were some self-important types wearing Army uniforms and carrying clipboards, pretending to supervise the operation. Since the war, you no longer saw much military presence on the piers, so it was obvious this cargo was somehow special, and as I started to make my way along the dockside, a couple of MPs blocked my progress.

Now of course, I carried all sorts of credentials, some of them forgeries, some of them legitimate, such as a Sullivan Act card signed by Mayor O'Dwyer, allowing me to carry a loaded weapon concealed on my person. I chose to display one of the less questionable falsifications, identifying me as an inspector of gas mains.

Their officers puffed up, naturally, but they had to let me through. In the city, licensing trumps everything.

I discovered Gyp O'Fearn in an act of pilferage.

Startled by my unheralded presence, he certainly appeared guilty enough and bundled away the man he was talking to with a few last-minute instructions.

"Act in haste, repent at leisure," I remarked.

He affected not to take my meaning. "Little off our graze, are we, Mickey?" he inquired, smiling.



"It's all the same to me, Gyp," I told him. "I'm a wee bit curious who's got you in their pocket though."

He looked to see whether anyone was listening, but we were by ourselves in the cavernous concrete Customs warehouse.

"Are the Provisionals rewarding you?" I asked him. I meant the IRA militia. "Sinn Fein's bagman, Des Morrissey?"

"I never knew you to have any politics," Gyp said, avoiding a direct answer.

"What's the strike talk?" I asked.

"Mickey, you're all over the map," he said, grinning. "I'd say you were fishing, with no bait on your hook."

"Too true," I said, smiling in return. "But then I'd say you were being disingenuous, Gyp. I found you with your hand in the cookie jar, right enough."

Again he feigned artless misunderstanding, his expression all puzzled innocence. "There's a lot of extra paperwork, a military consignment," he said. "Everything in triplicate, with the i's to be dotted, t's to be crossed."

"You're full of cobbles, Gyp," I said. "You're planning to misroute this cargo, send it on a trip around Lake Erie or the like. That, or steal it. The shifty-eyed barstid you were just speaking with now, Francis Xavier Quinn, known as Frankie the Lie. Tell me, sure, what business would the two of you have, it wouldn't prove to be monkey business?"

"Frankie's a shifty lad, I'm willing to admit," Gyp said to me candidly. "And you wouldn't be, yourself?"

He had me there.

"I'm thinking, where's the advantage?" he asked.

Ah. Now we were on the same turf. "Well," I said, buying myself some time, "how much money buys your silence?"

"It's worth my while."

"Is it, now?" I had to be canny, still. "How much is your life worth, then?"

"Are you threatening me, Mickey?"

"No, not I," I said. "I was thinking of the Italians."

He tried to bluff it out, holding my gaze, but I could read the doubt behind his bravado.

I sighed. "If you climb in bed with Costello and the Mafia capos, there's no going back, you know that."

"Who exactly are you speaking for, Mickey?"

"I speak for the Hannahs. Always have."

"Word is that Young Tim doesn't reside much trust in you."

"Say then that I speak for myself."

"What weight does that carry?"

I'd been doing my best not to act the threatening presence, but it was getting me nowhere. "Don't play the fool," I said.

"Oh, so it's bare knuckles now, is it?"

"Bare knuckles from me, or cement shoes from the Guineas."

I could see he was having second thoughts.

"Let's begin at the beginning," I said. "Whose water would you be carrying, and who offered you the bucket?"

He looked at me askance. "What am I getting in return for what I could tell you?" he asked.

"My silence," I said. "And you know I'm good for it. I've betrayed no man's confidences in thirty years." I shouldn't have had to remind him of it, but this was no time for niceties.

It was a quick and dirty deal, not soon forgiven.

He caved. I had a name for keeping my own counsel. Gyp knew he was balanced on the knife's edge and might require my goodwill, or that of the Hannah mob. It was easy enough to draw him out, after he'd felt the prick of the spurs.

I wondered, though, whether I was being too easily led, or if I only heard what I'd come ready to hear.

But in the event, his story was this:

Yes, there was a strike looming. Wages and benefits had been artificially depressed during the war, and now the men who worked the docks wanted their piece of the action. Which was seemingly fair enough. After all, there was a boom on. But there were others who expected a piece of the action, circling like wolves, and chief among them was the Costello organization, *primus inter pares* of the Five Families.

"Who've you made cause with then?" I asked him.

He looked sly and laid his index finger alongside of his nose, a gesture indicating a shared secret, something we were both privy to but knew better than to speak of aloud. It could mean anything, or nothing.

I lost patience, and at the end, as it all too often did in my experience, it came down to some knuckle-breaking. I have to wonder at people.

But it got me a name, although the name was new to me.

"Noel D'Oench," I said to Frankie the Lie. It had taken me a little time, but I'd eventually run him to ground at McAvoy's, a hole-in-the-wall piano bar abaft of Grand Central.

"Bunny, his friends call him," Frankie told me.

"Would you count yourself among them?" I asked him.

He snorted.

I raised my eyebrows. "Does that mean he has few friends," I

inquired, "or merely that his friends are better chosen?"

"It means he considers me below the salt," Frankie the Lie said with no small amount of venom in his tone. "He's too high and mighty for Harp primitives the likes of us."

I nodded. "It's often the case that when the upper classes go slumming, they find the company not to their liking."

"You know more about this than you're telling."

Of course I didn't. I was laying chum.

"He's a man for the great unwashed masses in principle, our Bunny is, but not in their smelly particulars," he told me.

Suffice it to say that the man was no simple snob, or so I understood from Frankie. It was a phenomenon I'd seen something of. There were people who came from money or privilege, who felt guilty about their advantages. But in the event, the folk they wanted to raise by their bootstraps turned out to be either unworthy or simply too damn stubborn to take instruction from their betters, and I counted myself among that number. It was apparently an eye-opening experience for someone like D'Oench to discover that so many of us desired no moral improvement.

"He's a man of divided loyalties," Frankie the Lie said.

"How so?" I asked.

Frankie tipped me a wink. "A leopard who's changed his spots," he said. "He worked for the War Department not so long ago."

I thought of the military personnel on the dock earlier.

"He left, it seems, under somewhat of a cloud."

"You can speak plainer than that," I said.

Frankie shrugged. "His sympathies were in question," he told me. "It's said he had a soft spot for Uncle Joe Stalin, or at the least a certain leftward spin to his footwork."

"He's an upper-class Red?"

"Hammer-and-sickle, no swords into ploughshares, neither."

Premature anti-Fascist before the war. Active in rallies for the Loyalist side in Spain. Broken hearted and confused, like so many other American lefties, by the nonaggression pact between Hitler and Stalin, but after the German invasion of Russia, a devoted commitment to defeating the Axis. It was a not uncommon *curriculum vitae*. What separated Bunny D'Oench from the pack, according to Frankie, was that beating the Nazis was only a signpost on a longer road. World brotherhood, arm in arm toward the greater good for the greatest number.

Frankie the Lie was to my knowledge only concerned with the greater good for a constituency of one.

"Idealism," he said, shaking his head. "It's all the same to me. A

mark's a mark, whatever his motives. It makes not a particle of difference whether you understand the man's weakness in fine, only that you know the weakness is there."

We understood each other, certainly. "I'm intrigued by his motives," I said.

Frankie looked at me askance. "You'd be wanting to see the Hannahs out of harm's way," he commented.

I hadn't thought to put it that way, but since he'd been so kind as to supply me with an alibi, I went along.

"It's none of their concern, or yours," he said.

I took the carbon flimsy out of my breast pocket and spread it on the table between us.

Frankie looked at it with cautious attention.

It was a copy of the cargo manifest, which I'd taken off of Gyp, almost as an afterthought.

"Cocoa, peanut oil, flax," I said with an inquiring glance at Frankie. "Which of it would you be buying at discount?"

"A thousand pounds of cocoa," Frankie the Lie said.

"Why's the Army there?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said, and I took him at face value.

"Gyp O'Ferna means to sidetrack the cocoa for you."

He spread his hands. It was too obvious to require an answer.

"Suppose the entire shipment goes astray?"

"What's that to me?" he asked.

"You're only bothering with chocolate."

"Where's the profit, else?"

"Would you think D'Oench to be in it for profit?"

"Ach," Frankie sniffed, "he answers to a higher calling."

"But this," I said to him, reading from the manifest. "Bauxite, manganese, lithium chloride? Metallic ore, chemicals, I'd imagine, in one form or another."

He shrugged.

I was at a loss to imagine the ready market. Contraband it might be, but neither fungible nor recognizably utilitarian.

"You don't steal what can't be sold," Frankie said, putting my thought into words.

"Not if you've only the one client," I agreed.

"Why would they be fool enough to buy it back?" Frankie asked.

"They'd simply hunt you down, the Army and the FBI."

Then what was Gyp selling D'Oench? I wondered, and answered my own question. Information.

Frankie the Lie, however, dealt in more tangible goods. "I wouldn't want you to queer this," he said.

"I've no need to," I told him.

"You've other villainy in mind," he said suspiciously.

"Gyp knows where the Army intends to ship that ore," I said to Frankie.

"Where would you be going with this?" he asked.

"Is the higher calling Bunny D'Oench answers to represented in the person of Des Morrissey's daughter Rose?"

He gave me an odd look. "Funny you'd know that," he said.

"You're hand in glove with Gyp," I said. "And more power to the both of you. I won't interfere. But leave Bunny D'Oench to me. D'ye take my meaning?"

"I do," he said.

I let it go at that.

**W**here did this leave me, you might well ask. I'd certainly gone beyond my mandate from Young Tim. I was working without portfolio. There was something unquiet about it, though. Nothing I could quite put my finger on, mind you, but a thing altogether disturbing. Too many anxious people in too much of a rush, and all of them eager to seem without haste. It smelled of fear, of stupid men in collusion, apprehensive and out of their depth.

I thought I understood Gyp O'Fearn's motivation. If the Mafia were crowding him, he'd turn to any port in a storm. But it was a mistake to turn too far left. Out in California, it had already taken a turn for the worse. There'd been an effort before the war to deport Harry Bridges, head of the West Coast CIO, as an undesirable alien—Bridges was Australian by birth—because of suspected Communist affiliations, and now the national leadership had stripped him of his union post.

There's a saying that when you sup with the Devil, you eat with a long spoon, but in and of itself, the fact that O'Fearn and the dock union were jumping from the frying pan into the fire was of little consequence to me, or so I thought. I was a good deal more interested in the suggestion that this man D'Oench was a political bedmate of Rose Morrissey's. Not that I was any expert on Communists, but it was my gut feeling that birds of a feather might very well nest together. I didn't know where this line of thought was taking me, and I let it flutter about.

The question Johnny Darling had raised was on my mind. How had Rose and Young Tim met?

Rose couldn't manage on her own, that was clear. Given her physical handicap, she'd need a helpmeet. I didn't feature her father squiring her to some assignation, or a gathering of the Party faithful, nor did Dermot quite fit the picture. Rose wouldn't want

a chaperone who had designs of his own, peripheral and perhaps antagonistic to hers. Who would she call on?

Certain sure, there were young men aplenty who'd take up her baton, among the shifty boys her father commanded, but their loyalty would be to Des. She'd have to reach out beyond that immediate orbit so as not to have her secrets common knowledge, but I didn't imagine she'd go that far afield.

Young Tim Hannah's meeting with Des and Rose Morrissey took place in neutral territory, or neutral territory of a sort, down in Little Italy at an Irish tap owned by one Timilty. Timilty was a Mick, but he had no traffic with the West Side mob or with Morrissey's bold Fenian ambitions. He paid protection to the Maranzano family, a Sicilian clan of the old school, who policed their neighborhood vigorously to discourage street crime and took the sensible approach that a small tithe on local merchants paid everybody a fair return.

It was early evening, not much past six o'clock, that magic hour in New York when the light turns watery and time stretches out. Kids were playing stickball on the street, with a tenement stairwell for home plate. Young shopgirls in cotton dresses were just getting home from work, their fathers and brothers out on the stoops in Guinea tees, having a beer before supper.

Des and his daughter turned up in a prewar Packard. They sat in back. Dermot was sitting shotgun. The car was driven by a lad who was certainly no chauffeur.

Dermot got out of the car first, scanning the street like the professional he was, and nodded courteously to me. The youngish-looking man got out and opened the back door of the Packard, letting Des out and then helping Rose across the seat. She managed to get out of the car rather gracefully, finding her feet and standing using a pair of braces. It reminded me again of Roosevelt.

She glanced at me and smiled. "This is a comforting scene, Mickey," she said. "A sentimental choice."

"A stroll about the perimeter?" Dermot said to me.

We cased the joint together. I wasn't offended by his care or his suspicion. In his place, I would have done the same.

Of course, as Des had suggested, the presence of Rose was proof against perfidy. Dermot was simply doing his job. It did occur to me, though, that the Provisionals had not always been so finicky when it came to civilian casualties, collateral to a target of opportunity. They had a name for the slaughter of innocents in the wrong place at the wrong time, and perhaps the Londonderry boy was thinking along those lines.

In the event, he reported back to Des that it was safe for now, a respectable venue, and all the exits covered.

Young Tim had come to the door of the saloon. He and Des looked each other over with the belligerence of predators who've met accidentally at a water hole and scattered the available game. I thought Des Morrissey's hostility a little too studied, however, an actor overplaying an underwritten part.

Rose, on the other hand, gave her role the exact notes of a Catherine Cornell or the Lunts. She was chilly but without giving offense. Neither deferential, nor overtly rude. She had a kind of majestic impudence, and I found it enthralling.

I wasn't alone. She was playing to an audience of one. Dermot and I had faded back into the wallpaper, and Des himself seemed to realize he was no more than a secondary character—Claudius, not Hamlet.

Rose and Young Tim were the leads. It was a drama of their own making, and for all I knew, they'd rehearsed it beforehand.

"So, how do you suggest we begin?" she asked him.

"We began already with an invitation," he said, showing her to a chair with a grave and somewhat awkward courtesy, hovering but not making actual physical contact, so she was free to use the support of his arm if she chose—which she was careful not to—and then he moved a quarter turn around the table, so he wouldn't be sitting opposite her. "You've done me the compliment of accepting." He glanced up at Des, waiting for him to take his place.

Des sat down across from his daughter, so the Morrisseys were bracketing Young Tim when he took his own seat. It was an interesting arrangement, to separate Des and Rose, putting Young Tim something in the position of an adjudicator.

"Artful, that," Dermot murmured to me, under his breath.

We'd placed ourselves far enough away for good manners but not out of hearing.

Des opened with belligerence. "Well, we've answered your summons," he announced, settling his weight heavily and planting his elbows on the table. "What is it you hope to gain?"

Young Tim was at pains not to rise to the bait. "An accommodation," he replied. He said this to Rose and not to her father. His tone of voice was frank, not insinuating.

The tavern owner, Timilty, appeared out of the shadows with a jug of Tullamore Dew and put it on the table. He set out a carafe of water and two tumblers, and then, after a moment's hesitation, a third glass for Rose. He retreated again, keeping his doubts to himself.

Young Tim poured a drop for each of the three of them, and



offered the carafe of water to Rose. She declined, smiling, and raised her glass. She and Young Tim clicked rims.

Des looked on in astonishment. He'd all too obviously been blindsided and was trying to recover.

"What do you make of this charade?" I asked Dermot.

"I think Desmond Morrissey has realized, somewhat too late, that he's been outmaneuvered by the fires of youth," he said.

"You knew," I said.

"How not?"

"You approve?"

"It's not my place to sit in judgment," he remarked.

"No, only to mete out sentence."

He looked at me sharply.

"And what of your masters?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "That's neither here nor there," he said.

"Perhaps not," I said, "but the Provisionals have certainly undertaken and then discarded many a marriage of convenience."

"And that's what you'd consider this?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of Sinn Fein accepting German money and guns during the last war," I said.

"The first war, too, come to that."

"Which led me to another line of thought, namely, that your principals would take comfort from any available quarter."

"It's a line of thought that could lead you astray," Dermot said, narrowing his eyes.

"I was wondering about Bunny D'Oench," I said. "If he were able to broker this arrangement between Young Tim and Rose, might he not have brokered a further arrangement, which I'll not put into words?"

Dermot chose an indirect reply. "What kind of name is that for a grown man?" he asked.

"It's one of those nicknames that attach to you at college, or perhaps in boarding school," I said.

"A totem of privilege," he suggested.

"Dermot, old son, the children of privilege differ from the likes of you and me."

"In kind? I think not. Only in their condescension."

Frankie the Lie had characterized D'Oench much the same way, I recalled. Bunny was beginning to sound like somebody I'd sooner not encounter, but there was no help for it.

Young Tim was helping Rose Morrissey to her feet. Des kept his seat and his truculent expression, but he now knew himself for a man helpless in the grip of events. The conversation between Young Tim Hannah and his daughter had been delicate and oddly

ceremonial, but there was no mistaking the intimacy they shared, one they were free to pursue in private or in public, as they thought best, without fear of intrusion.

"Des looks a beaten man," I said to Dermot.

"As well he might."

"But you've already cast your lot with Rose," I said.

"Des Morrissey's a creature of the past," he said.

"Meaning that he's outlived his usefulness?"

"A habit of thought can become an impediment."

"Nursing old grievances? I thought Sinn Fein's strong suit had always been a careful misreading of history."

"It's the Irish disease," Dermot said, smiling. "We forget everything but our injuries."

"Des Morrissey's unlikely to forgive or forget *this* injury, a life's work put aside for an expedient."

"Politics is expediency. Des understands his position."

"Does he, indeed? Does he understand yours?"

"He understands the need for discipline."

"You're a harder man than I took you for, Dermot."

"You're a hard man yourself, Mickey," he said. "I respect you for it."

"I intended no compliment," I told him.

He tipped his head. "I'll take what I can get," he said.

You'll take whatever portion I mete out, I thought.

**W**hat was I missing? Something obvious, although obviously not something readily apparent. In hindsight, of course, it was all too easily seen. We're often blind to what's before us.

I thought, of course, that I'd boxed the compass, that I'd at least reconnoitered the ground and seen where my advantage lay. I said nothing to Young Tim because his purpose and mine were at odds. He'd secured his standing with Rose Morrissey; my own thankless task was to save him from himself, if necessary.

But it wasn't to be.

I'm an early riser, and first thing next morning I was having corned beef hash with a couple of poached eggs on top at one of my usual haunts, the Greek's on Twelfth. It was just past five thirty, and the place was already crowded with dockworkers on their way to the shape-up, where the shop stewards made their picks for the upcoming day shift.

An odd buzz started up among the men, some news, a rumor, and the place got quiet as word went around, the usual rowdy talk stilled, conversations dropping to a murmur, all good humor suddenly absent. And the joint emptied out, not by twos and

threes, but all at once, like a fire drill. I was sitting there by myself. Abandoned at the counter were unfinished mugs of coffee still steaming, plates of scrambled eggs and hash browns and bacon, French toast and sausages, bowls of hot cereal.

I left my breakfast and followed the crowd. There were more of them now, men from up and down the waterfront, silent, not jostling each other, moving steadily but without unseemly hurry, as if it were a procession. They led the way to Pier 86, and their uneasy silence was premonitory.

It was a cold morning, still only half lit, the promise of warmth, like the sun on the horizon just touching the far side of Manhattan. Here on the West Side by the Hudson we were in shadow. There was a breeze, brisk and raw, lifting a layer of fog off the water, and the river currents, dark and oily, sucked at the pilings.

The freighter from Abidjan was tilted down at the bow, her foredecks awash, listing some fifteen degrees to port. Only the thick hawsers kept her from turning turtle in the slip.

"Swamped," a man near me said, not much above a whisper.

"Scuttled," the man next to him said, even softer.

"Anybody aboard?" the first man asked, his voice husky.

"They say the night watch got off in time, but not the crew boss and his men. They were belowdecks."

He meant the longshoremen who worked the graveyard shift, preparing cargoes for off-load when daylight came. I understood the previous heavy silence. Not mournful, enraged. It could have been any of them. There was an undercurrent of angry muttering now, but there seemed to be no easy outlet for their anger. The MPs and their young officer looked nervous all the same. The crowd around them was in an ugly mood.

"Just like the damn *Normandie*," somebody said.

Well, perhaps not just like, I thought. He was referring to the French luxury liner that had sunk a few slips north of this one while being converted to a troop ship early in the war. A fire broke out in the Grand Saloon, and the fireboats pumped so much water into the ship that it capsized. It was rumored at the time to be German sabotage, but in fact the *Normandie* arson had been ordered by the mob bosses as part of a daft scheme to get Lucky Luciano out of Dannemora, in exchange for Mafia muscle to police the New York harborfront while the war was on.

In the event, none of the men on the pier chalked today's sinking up to simple misadventure. Nor did I. And it was significant that the prevailing wisdom leaned toward sabotage or involvement by gangsters.

I spotted Frankie the Lie hovering on the periphery and made

my way over to him. You could see from the look on his face there were a thousand pounds of cocoa at the bottom of the Hudson.

"Not the best night's work," I murmured.

He shook his head sadly.

"I trust you didn't front Gyp the money," I said.

"No, but I had customers already lined up," he told me. "I mislike going back on a promised delivery."

"There'll be other cargoes for Gyp to steer your way."

He looked at me queerly. "You don't know the whole of it, do you?" he asked. Then he raised his chin toward the foundered freighter, as if to say, Look again.

And then I caught on. Gyp O'Fearna had been the night crew boss, and he'd drowned in the freighter's hold. I turned away from Frankie, and there behind me, not twenty feet back, was Dermot, the boy from Belfast, watching us with his languid smile and hooded eyes.

I stalked over to him. "What do you know of this?" I demanded. I was stifling no small fury of my own, but I had the wit to keep my voice down.

Dermot was startled by my vehemence. "Nothing," he said.

"What are you doing here?"

He hesitated. "I thought it best that I kept an eye on you for a time," he said, and I took it for the truth.

"You know a man named O'Fearna?" I asked him.

"No," he said, "but *him* I've seen before." He cut his eyes at Frankie the Lie. "Quinn, the man you were talking to."

"In the company of Bunny D'Oench?"

Dermot nodded.

"Frankie works the black market," I told him. "He'd likely prove useful as a money man or to carry the odd message."

"This kind of job requires a division of labor."

"What kind of job?"

"The cargo was important enough for the Army to secure it," Dermot said, nodding toward the MPs.

"It was a military consignment," I said.

"Munitions?"

"Why would you ask?"

"The ruptured bow plates, below the waterline. They've buckled from the inside out, which suggests an explosive rise of pressure in the hold."

"You'd have experience," I paused, "with this kind of job."

"I know how to sink a ship," he said.

So would Gyp O'Fearna, I figured, but he'd know better than to drown himself doing it.

"If not ordnance, what? Diesel fuel's inert, but you'd get evaporation with aviation gasoline."

I told him what I remembered from the manifest.

He didn't ask how I'd come by it. "Bauxite, to produce aluminum," he said. "Manganese dioxide's an alloying agent used for hardening bronze or steel."

I'd never have taken him for a chemist, Dermot, but he knew guns, and I should have realized he'd know incendiaries.

"Lithium chloride, now," he mused, thoughtfully. "Lithium by itself doesn't occur in nature. It's an alkali, recovered from brine. Very high heat-transfer quality. Much the same chemical properties as sodium, which is to say that pure refined lithium reacts violently to immersion in water."

"And might the Army choose to conceal its nature by listing it on the cargo manifest as something less volatile?"

"It can't be exposed to the air," Dermot said. "It would be transported in sealed containers. You'd have to open them up and uncover the contents."

"And conveniently forget to tell Gyp O'Fearna that when he opened the sea-cocks to flood the hold, the metal would burn, or boil, in contact with water."

"It gives off a sort of crimson light, I'm told," he said.

"White-hot, it might stick to the skin, sulfurous, like jellied naphtha, what your boys used against the Japs in the Pacific."

I had a sudden unbidden picture of what it might have been like in the semidarkened cargo hold, the water coming in around the men's ankles, and then the abrupt, phosphorescent heat.

"Best not to dwell on it," Dermot advised me.

"No, concentrate on method or means," I said.

"Consequences are for the weak," Dermot agreed cheerfully.

And it's the weak who suffer them, I thought to myself. But of course he meant something altogether different, that a predator acts without misgiving or second thoughts. Outside the loyalties of the pack, the rest of us are simply meat.

The time had come, I decided, to thin the herd.

**A** thirst for social justice is no bad thing, I'd said to Johnny Darling, and I knew there were people of ideals on the Left, men who'd fought in the Lincoln Brigade, men who fought in the war against the Germans and the Japanese and came home to find little or no change in the social polity. But were they fertile ground for recruitment by the Kremlin? There was a lot of spy talk that year and in the years that followed. How much of it was guff or

anti-Red hysteria? My concerns were more parochial and less political.

Bunny D'Oench was a youngish-looking man with a willowy build. On closer inspection, I saw his youthful appearance was an artful self-invention, the fair hair thinning but arranged in a careful combover, his neck softening and the definition of his chin beginning to weaken, a slackness of physical tone that studied tailoring could ameliorate but not entirely conceal. At a distance, he might be taken for a ravaged twenty. Face to face, he was twice that. I felt revenged, having had the unworthy thought that Rose might be flattered by his attentions.

My first good look at him had come when I got word he was leaving his place of work at 46th and Lex, just past noon. I'd assigned Bunny's surveillance to a pair of my policy runners, the boys who picked up betting slips in Midtown. They were canny lads, not above fifteen, sharp as piano wire and skinny as skimmed milk. I gave them twenty apiece and packed them off.

I kept pace with Bunny a few blocks south to Grand Central, where he repaired to the Oyster Bar and lunched with what I took to be a group of his colleagues. They wore bespoke suits and Sulka ties, and none of them appeared to be of Eastern European origin, or remotely interested in the plight of the common man. Protestants the lot, with good facial bones and the presumption of caste.

Cocktails beforehand, wine with the meal. Afterward, he might have been a little the worse for wear. I followed him up to the concourse again and down into the subway. He headed for the Times Square shuttle.

Two in the afternoon, or thereabouts. The lower levels were crowded. I lost sight of him for a moment, but then I spotted him standing near the edge of the platform. I made my way forward as the train came clattering in. Somebody screamed. The motorman punched his brakes, the wheels shrieked against the tracks, and the train stopped short with a metallic shudder.

It didn't matter; I saw. Bunny D'Oench had fallen on the third rail and been electrocuted. A wisp of smoke rose from his scalp. There was a smell of ozone and scorched hair.

I hadn't been close enough to touch him.

Turning away, I caught a passing glimpse of Dermot.

Our eyes didn't meet.

So, what cheer?

The strategy, if you can call it that, that the Italian mob had thought to employ, to tar the dock unions with a Communist



brush so as to camouflage their own corrupt intentions, came back to haunt them. It drew too much unwelcome attention. The hearings that followed put Costello, Adonis, Albert Anastasia and his brother Tony, and even Benny Siegel's onetime girlfriend Virginia Hill on the witness stand.

And as to actual Communist subversion, the short answer appears to be that after the Rosenbergs and the arrival of that poisonous windbag Joe McCarthy on the scene, the Russians no longer recruited well-meaning amateurs with a history of leftie sympathies from among the Party faithful. They fed the Parlor Pinks and fellow travelers to the wolves and relied on KGB pros with manufactured backgrounds and colorless cover stories.

Concerning our friend Dermot, he went back to his masters empty handed, or so it appeared. But perhaps I'd framed the issue to Dermot without quite understanding it in fine. I'd planted the suspicion Bunny D'Oench couldn't be trusted to keep his end of the bargain, and Dermot had taken the hint. If the past were any prologue, however, Sinn Fein wouldn't turn down Moscow's money or matériel any more than they'd refused it from Hitler. They were cut from the same cloth, the IRA's bully boys as ruthless and unbending as any commissar.

But what of Montagues and Capulets?

Young Tim Hannah had more cunning than I'd given him credit for. His overture to the Morrissey clan had been couched as an alliance between equals, and it was this, not promises of boyish devotion, which had captured Rose. They married, and from all accounts, they were well matched. Not every man wants a pliant wife, Young Tim had said to me. Rose Morrissey Hannah wasn't one to sit by the hearth, but neither was she an embarrassment to her husband. Her politics were still fierce enough, but she banked the fires. At the end of the day, perhaps Rose came to realize, looking toward the future, that the heirs of Stalin and those of that savage Irish ancient, John Devoy, faced in the wrong direction. ♣

## SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

From "Bolter," AHMM, October 2005

—Naomi Bell

I met her once, undercover. Even though I knew what she was up to, after ten minutes I'd have given her the deed to my house.

# SAINT CASIMIR'S FIRE

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## MARIANNE WILSKI STRONG

### THURSDAY

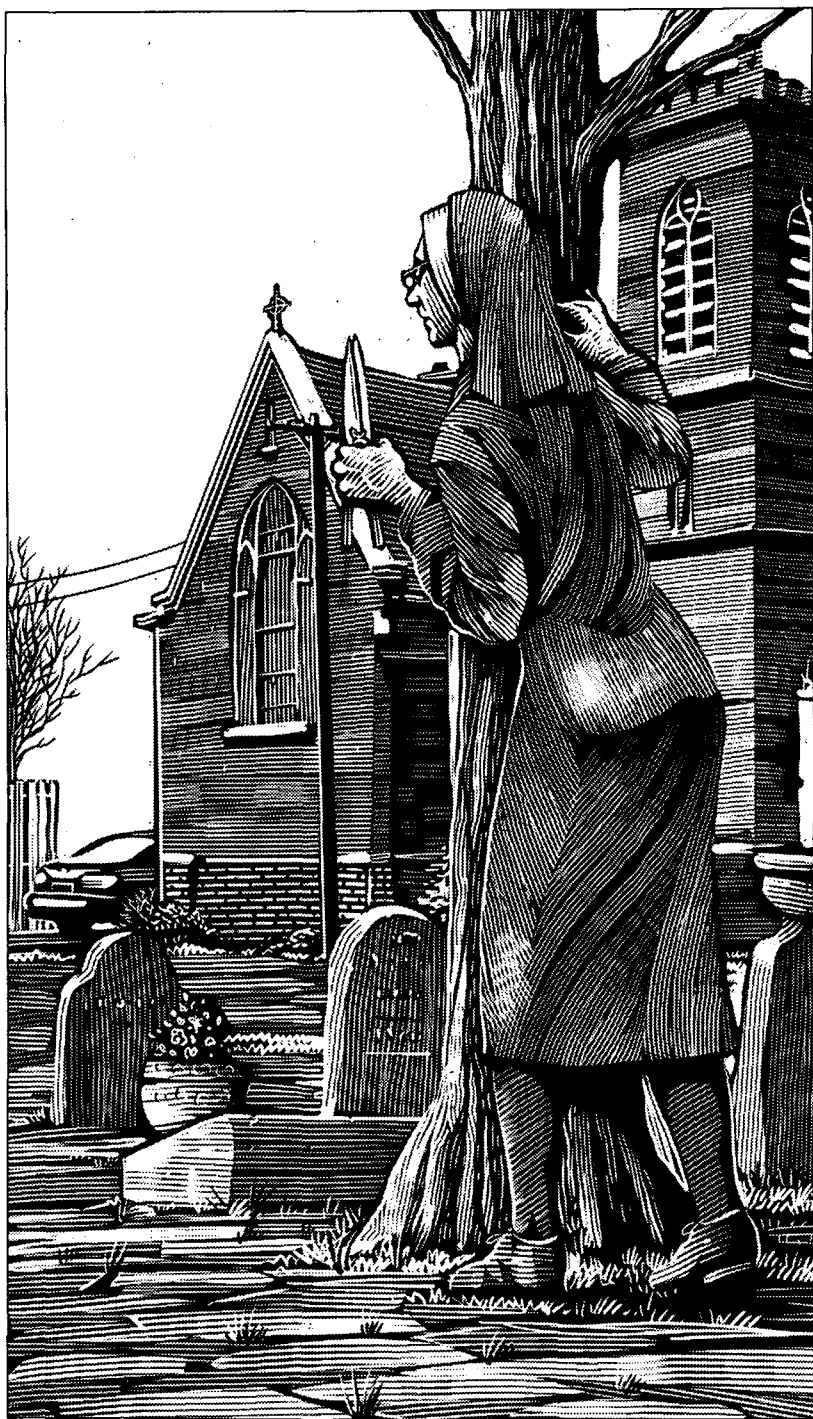
On Highway 361, Sister Carla pulled her convent's brown Honda CRV to the side of the road. A black Lexus sped past. She shook her head. Everyone in a hurry these days, she thought. Even sightseers. Jenkinsville drew sightseers who ignored the warning signs.

The car, a black blur on the burnt red landscape, sped up the road toward the church. Once there, the Lexus bounced over the pitted shoulder of the road and, fifty yards beyond the church, lurched to a halt in front of a stand of bushes. Two men waited in the car.

Sister Carla stared down a street that led to nowhere, its white clapboard houses long since destroyed, then opened the car door and stepped out. She had, many a time, left the relative safety of the highway to walk the town streets she had walked as a child. But today she did not have the time to pick her way carefully between the fissures and the blasted soil. She had a job to do, maybe for the last time.

The Pennsylvania state mining engineer stopped and read the sign: JENKINSVILLE MINE FIRE: UNSTABLE GROUND. IT IS DANGEROUS TO WALK OR DRIVE OVER THIS GROUND. He leaned his head out the window of his truck and gazed round at the ashy red soil and blasted trees. He checked his watch, then continued on his way up the mountainside to the meeting that had been arranged. He'd confirmed with John Fletcher the identity of the old mine foreman, but that didn't mean much. Without maps, the foreman probably wouldn't remember the layout of the mine tunnels.

He pulled his truck onto the paved parking spot on the right side of the rectory, got out, and walked around the outside of Saint Casimir's Church, bending over occasionally to inspect the foundation walls. He ran a finger down some of the cracks, pulled out an instrument from his tool bag, and took some measurements. He shook his head, took a picture of a crack in the foundation, shook his head again, and made some notes.



He looked down the road. No car approached.

Fishing in his pocket, he climbed twelve steps to the church's heavy oak front doors. There he jiggled a key in the lock and pushed. One of the doors swung open with a groan.

The engineer stepped inside, squinting in the gloom of the shadows of gothic arches through which pale shafts of blue and red fell from stained glass windows.

He started down the aisle.

Behind the engineer, the church door groaned again. The engineer turned, heard a step behind him, and swung back to the front of the church.

A man, holding a black pouch, had stepped out from the front vestibule of the church.

A second man appeared in the dim light from a side chapel. He was holding a gun.

Alarmed, the engineer reached into his shirt pocket for his cell phone. Something slammed into his chest and burst in his ears. He spun round. He heard two more blasts, then stumbled into the pew on his right. The last thing he saw was two men darting away through the pillars of the aisle.

Sister Carla passed the warning signs without reading them. She knew the dangers of Jenkinsville well.

Only last week, she'd shown the state engineer where the mine fire had started. She had guided him over the old pit like a divining rod for fire, picking her way expertly over the seared ground, pointing out ash holes, warning him of hot spots and weakened grounds. "Dangerous place, my hometown," she had said wryly. "Even on such a sunny bright day, one never knows what part of the earth is ready to drop from beneath you into the pit of hell."

Today, a fine rain dropped a silver sheen over the mountains that ringed Jenkinsville. On such a day, the underground mine fire made its unholy presence very visible, the hot steam and gases boiling up from below and condensing into smoky plumes.

Sister Carla sped up. She was in a hurry. Before she returned to the convent in Wilkes-Barre, she had to ready Saint Casimir's for services this weekend. Jenkinsville's displaced people would return to their town for a few hours. Sad, this preparation once a month for a Mass in a church where she had once attended Midnight Masses, walked in Easter processions, sang in a choir, and decided to become a Sister of Mercy.

Lord knew there was little mercy in or for this godforsaken

Pennsylvania mining town. But it was hard to let go of what was left. One hung on to it as one hung on to a fatally ill loved one.

She pulled the convent's Honda onto the gravel drive next to the church and to the left of the old rectory where Father Kelski stayed now and then when he celebrated Mass. She shut off the engine, leaned to the left, and looked up at the cemetery on the rise above the church, where former parish priests and members of the parish, including her parents, were buried. She wanted to tend to their graves today, though she did not relish getting damp and bone chilled in the sullen rain.

She delayed leaving the warmth of the car. Through the turbid wash of rain on the windshield, the path and the steps to the cemetery looked limp and unsteady, as if about to dissolve.

Shivering, she pulled her black sweater tighter round her neck and chest. She peered again through the rain. Something was not right, not quite how she had left Saint Casimir's when she was last here.

A blur of red ran the length of the gravel driveway between the church and the cemetery and ended up flanking the path and the steps.

Sister Carla squinted.

The blur coalesced into the bank of chrysanthemums she had planted three weeks ago. They should have been about a foot high, and most were, but some had been trampled.

She started the motor and switched on the windshield wipers, remembering from about half a year ago the series of break-ins in the few remaining buildings in Jenkinsville. She looked at the windows of the church. They were intact. No one had broken into the church.

Her alarm subsided. Sightseers often drove up to Jenkinsville to inspect what was essentially a ghost town. In a world of computers, SUVs, and iPods, a town where people had become victims of an angry earth, was apocalyptic and ignited curiosity. Sometimes the visitors were careless about where they stepped, unaware or uncaring that people had ties to the town yet: loved ones buried in the cemetery, gardens they still tended, streets they walked as children.

She turned off the motor and reached for her umbrella and the black bag in which she kept the keys to the church. She never failed to lock the church door, though it was as much in a futile gesture to keep away the encroaching mine fire as to keep out thieves.

She clicked open her umbrella, slammed her car door, and headed for the steps that led up to the front door of the church. At the top step, she noticed the door was ajar.

She caught her breath and stood for a moment staring at the

door, wondering if someone had broken into the church after all. There were some items of value: a chalice, and an icon of ivory

**The underground mine fire made its unholy presence very visible, hot steam and gases boiling up from below, condensing into smoky plumes.** and gold brought from Poland in the early part of the twentieth century. But the chalice was gold plated, Sister

Carla was sure. She had clicked her fingernail against it many a time. It sounded tinny. The ivory statue of Saint Casimir was indeed lovely and no doubt valuable, but surely not worth more than five thousand dollars, and it was locked up.

Well, she thought, five thousand was enough. She backed slowly down the steps, planning to get out of the way of any potential danger. She'd get to her car and drive quickly to Sheriff Delensa's office in Pottsville. She'd use her cell phone to call as she drove.

She reached her car, opened the door, got in, backed out, and only then saw the back of a blue Toyota truck protruding from Father Kelski's parking spot on the other side of the old rectory.

She sighed with relief, berating herself for forgetting. When she'd agreed to give the state mining engineer her spare key two weeks ago, she had asked him to come, if possible, when she could be there too. She wanted to know the verdict on Saint Casimir's fate.

She sat for a moment in the car, reluctant to move, reluctant to give up hope. But she could smell disaster: the smell of sulfur and burning earth. She knew that the mine fire had burned its way up the coal seam from the other side of Jenkinsville. If it had reached this far, the church would be condemned and shut.

She felt anger rise in her heart. She didn't know who was responsible for the fire. No one knew. The state of Pennsylvania itself, for neglecting to regulate the mine companies? The Fletchers, owners of the Jenkinsville Mining Company? The miners themselves, careless with a lantern, an explosive, a gas gauge? Whoever was guilty, the state was now poised to condemn one of the last living pieces of Jenkinsville. Sister Carla felt she could work up mercy and charity for the workers, but not for any corrupt officials and mine owners. "Mercy but murders," she mumbled, "pardoning those that kill." She lifted her eyes toward the heavens. "Shakespeare said it," she said. "I'm just quoting." She chuckled at herself as she got out of the car. She walked up the church steps and pushed open the heavy oak door. Inside she stood for a moment, her eyes adjusting to the gloom of the interior, darker than the gray day outside. If the mine engineer were here, he had not switched on the church lights.

Sister Carla looked toward the small chapel to the right where



the exquisite icon of Saint Casimir, the pious prince of Poland, was kept in its polished oak case. Draped over the saint's golden body, stippled ivory formed a hairshirt and the key to heaven, which hung near the hem. The statue had been there for many years now, a steady, stable presence in this town of disturbed and burning earth.

Sister Carla sighed. If the church were to be condemned, as it surely would be, the icon would have to be taken away. The day the icon was moved would be the day of Jenkinsville's final breath. Its soul would be gone.

At the chapel, off to the side of the icon, a single electric candle glowed, a dim unchanging spot of light, producing no flickering gleams as real candles would have done. Father Kelski had had to forbid the use of real candles in a church used only once or twice a month.

Sister Carla stood and stared. Something had been moved. She turned and looked behind. "Hello," she called out. "Anybody here?"

No answer.

Cautiously, she moved forward up the central aisle of the church, between the oak pews and the enameled stations of the cross that hung on the pillars of the gothic arches.

She was halfway up the aisle when she saw it.

From between two pews, a foot protruded into the aisle.

She moved toward it, hardly breathing.

She saw a leg crumpled against one of the pews, then the torso with a blue windbreaker and a white shirt washed in blood.

She froze, then moved forward rapidly and knelt by the man, forcing herself to look closely. She could detect no movement, no breath, no rise and fall of his shattered chest. She recognized death. She recognized the state engineer.

She turned and ran up the aisle and outside to her car. She drove faster than usual down the mountain road, calling on her cell phone to the sheriff of Pottsville.

It was two hours before she was able to return to Saint Casimir's. She had filled out reports, talked to the Wilkes-Barre detectives summoned by the sheriff, waited until the sheriff returned from the church, and learned that the dead man was indeed Donald Herald, the mine engineer. He had been shot through the chest with a pistol, a .45 millimeter, and nothing seemed to have been stolen from the church.

She frowned. "Why would someone want to kill the state mining engineer?"

Sheriff Delensa cocked his head and looked at her with narrowed eyes. "A pretty obvious reason comes to mind."

Sister Carla cocked her own head. "Yes," she said. "Someone who didn't want Saint Casimir's condemned. A number of people might have that motive, including me." She smiled at the sheriff. "Ever fingerprint a nun?"

Sheriff Delensa blinked. "Nope. Wouldn't hesitate, but no need to. Yet, anyway. I have an idea that someone besides yourself might have been up at the church."

"Who?"

"About a week ago, Herald asked me who the mining foremen had been over the years. He needed mine maps. Apparently, he'd talked with John Fletcher and got nowhere. According to Herald, Fletcher said he'd helped his father run the mine company for a short time, then went into law and paid little attention to the mine. Said that his run again for senator left him too busy to help, that he didn't remember who the mine foremen were, and that he thought the mine maps had been misplaced years ago."

"Probably correct," Sister Carla said. "Everybody knows that a lot of mine maps got misplaced or destroyed. Good way to avoid responsibility once mines started to cave in from support pillars left too thin."

As with most of the mines in eastern Pennsylvania, this mine had been leased and registered under so many different corporate names at so many different times, the state, without identifying maps, had not been able to track down exactly who owned the mines at what time.

Delensa unwrapped a stick of gum and popped it into his mouth. "Like you said, wouldn't be unusual for mine maps to disappear, for any number of reasons. Probably why Herald wanted to know who the mine foremen were. They'd have some idea of where and how the mine tunnels run under the city. I couldn't help Herald either, so I told him to ask Father Kelski or some of the old diehards, seniors I guess we call them now, still living in town." Delensa cracked his gum. "Do you know the names of any of the foremen?"

Sister Carla tapped her fingers on the sheriff's desk. "I should, but I was pretty young when the fire started and the mine shut down. Do you think Herald found any names?"

"If he did find any foremen around, he didn't tell me. I'll have to talk to some of the old guys."

"So you're thinking maybe a foreman witnessed what happened?"

"Witness, perp, accomplice. We'll see. Of course, we could be

dealing with a completely unknown thief, though I saw no evidence even of attempted theft."

Sister Carla tapped her fingers again. "As I said, I'm sure that the electric candle had been moved. I always leave it directly in front of the icon."

Delensa reached for a second stick of gum. He held it up. "Better than cigarettes, my wife says. My dentist disagrees. Well, the church is locked until forensics finishes, likely in two or three days at the most, but once you get back to the church, you can check to see if anything is missing or disturbed. Then let me know." Delensa grinned. "You get any inspirations about who did this, let me know that too."

When she returned to the church, Sister Carla was shocked to see the yellow police tape, incongruous against the figures of Saints John and Matthew that were carved into the dark brown oak doors.

She looked around, then bent down under the tape, her short veil gliding against it. She checked the door for herself. It was locked, just as the sheriff had told her it would be.

She would come back tomorrow to get the church ready for the Sunday service, if as Sheriff Delensa had said the police work would be completed by the Wilkes-Barre detectives.

For now, she did not want to go inside the church. The sheriff had checked the icon and chalice. They were still in the church. She'd take his word for that.

She bent again under the tape, stood, and looked up at the sky. The sun, just glinting through the dissolving clouds, had dropped to the height of the pine trees on Jenkins Mountain. She had an hour of daylight left and two hours before she had to be back to the convent in Wilkes-Barre for supper.

She returned to her car and pulled out clippers, a small shovel, and a small box from the back seat. Tucking them under her arm, she headed down the driveway to the stone steps that led to the cemetery on the hill behind the church.

She walked with her head down, thinking about the mine engineer. She could think of several people who could have wanted him dead. Feeling blasphemous, she thought of Father Kelski, for one. He had served in Saint Casimir's for almost thirty years before Jenkinsville lost its population. He would not want the church condemned. But would he kill to prevent that? Sister Carla doubted it. The state would only send out another engineer to check the safety of the church's foundation and the progress of the mine fire toward it. A number of townspeople still in the area

might have shot the engineer. Some of them, bitter over the loss of their town, might blame the state for the disaster. Moreover, the men were hunters and target shooters. They had rifles, surely, but seldom, if ever, pistols.

She reached the top of the stone stairway and stopped.

Ahead of her, a woman was kneeling at a gravesite, her head bowed, her coat a splotch of blue in the reddish brown landscape. The woman put a pot of pansies into place against the gravestone, opened her purse, and put a few things inside, then rose, bent forward, and put a hand on the gravestone. She kept it there, as if trying to reach the person buried beneath.

Sister Carla recognized the woman.

A light breeze swayed the pines and rustled through the few brown leaves left on the trees. Sister Carla coughed.

The woman turned. Her face was pale and drawn against the black scarf wrapped around her head. Gray hair poked out over the deep-set eyes and high cheekbones.

"Mrs. Rosczak," Sister Carla said, "I'm sorry to disturb you."

Mrs. Rosczak shook her head. "I was just ready to leave." She clasped her purse to her chest, as if protecting it from an imaginary thief.

"Have you been here long?"

"No."

"Then you don't know what happened in the church earlier?"

Mrs. Rosczak turned her head to the gravestones, one weathered and one still polished and clear. "I came to tend my mother's and my daughter's graves. Before I no longer can. Before the fire swallows even their bones." She looked toward the church. "I no longer visit the church. It cannot save us now." She lifted her eyes to Sister Carla. "The mines were once life for us, for my husband, for my daughter, and now they are death. It would have been better if we had left long ago and not made this pact with the devil and this fire."

Sister Carla nodded; she understood the bitterness. She explained what had happened.

Mrs. Rosczak listened quietly. She did not gasp or ask questions.

When Sister Carla finished, Mrs. Rosczak blessed herself. "We are all condemned here." Still clutching her purse, she walked past Sister Carla to the stone stairway. There, she turned, paused, then turned back to the stairs and descended slowly, carefully.

Sister Carla watched her go. She wondered but could not imagine Mrs. Rosczak shooting the engineer, though the woman had good reason. Her daughter had suffered terrible bouts of asthma from the fumes that had crept into the Rosczak house, as had others whose houses had sat on the very core of the fire before it

was discovered. With medical help, the daughter had survived for some time, though with damaged lungs.

Sister Carla shook her head. The capacity of humans for both good and evil never ceased to surprise her. Maybe that was why she loved teaching history. It was like poking into the gardens and bogs of human nature.

She sighed, walked to the right, and stopped at a granite gravestone carved with roses and a rosary. The graves of her mother and father.

All the graves around had been tidied, and chrysanthemums had been placed on several of them. Just up the hill, at the foot of a granite shrine to Saint Casimir, was a wooden box on which more chrysanthemums sat surrounding a candle, now burning low within its glass case.

Sister Carla made a mental note to bring another candle to replace the nearly burnt-out one. She put down her box, took the clippers, and began to clip back the weeds, somewhat withered now, but still alive enough to creep over the gravestone. Then she shoveled a small hole, opened the box, and took out a plant. She placed the yellow chrysanthemum bush carefully into the ground. It would last almost until January, even in the heavy mountain snow. The fire would give off enough heat to melt the snow and keep the roots warm. Even now, as she knelt on the ground, Sister Carla could feel the warmth in her knees.

She stood up, her knees warm, but the rest of her body aware of the growing chill in the air as the sun dipped lower toward the mountaintop.

As she turned toward the driveway, she saw a black Lexus stopped on Church Road. She stepped behind a thick maple tree and pulled out the clippers from the box into which she had dropped them. Not much defense against a pistol, she thought, but the only weapon at hand.

She peered from behind a branch with enough leaves to give her some cover, thanking God for her brown frock and veil, hard to spot, no doubt, in the fast dimming light. The car moved forward slowly, drifting down the mountain road past the church. Then it sped up and moved out of sight around the curve toward what was left of Jenkinsville.

"All the saints in Heaven," Sister Carla muttered. Why hadn't she thought of getting a license number? But then, in the nascent twilight, she couldn't have seen the number anyway.

She took a few steps forward, found she was a little shaky, and leaned against a wrought-iron fence, which surrounded a group of gravestones. She looked at them. The gravestones of the Fletcher family.

Sister Carla looked at the gravestone in the center of the group. Lena Tamalski Fletcher. Carved into the granite gravestone was the figure of Saint Casimir.

Sister Carla remembered. She'd been told by Father Kelski that Lena Tamalski had married a Fletcher. Unusual for a Pole to marry into a reasonably wealthy English family of mine owners, but not unheard of. Lena had not forgotten her Polish background. She had commissioned the sculpting of the icon and brought it over from Poland for the church.

"Thank God, it is still here," Sister Carla murmured. Then she thought of the black Lexus. She hastened to her own car and drove down to Pottsville to Sheriff Delensa's office. She had her inspiration now. After all, nobody left in Jenkinsville could afford a Lexus.

Inside the office, she greeted the sheriff and nodded to the man seated in front of the sheriff's desk. She knew him. Chester Zamback's hair had turned silver, but it remained as thick as it had been when he was janitor and carpenter at Saint Casimir's School, where Carla had excelled in history but bungled her way through every math class except geometry. She'd always had a fine sense of form.

Zamback nodded, then turned back to the sheriff. "I never talked to Father . . ." He shook his head as if to clear it. "No, I never talked to the engineer. Just to Father Kelski. I told him the names of some of the foremen. He said he'd pass them on to the state engineer. But Rosczak is the only one left." He lifted his index finger. "One," he said, reassuring himself.

Sister Carla sat bolt upright.

"Did Herald contact Rosczak?" Delensa asked.

Zamback shrugged. "I don't know." He frowned and dropped his faded blue eyes to the floor. The blue eyes flicked from the sheriff to Sister Carla and back. "This is all my fault. The engineer and now Rosczak. The Fletchers were always powerful. And dangerous. I knew that. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I should not have said anything."

"It's okay, Chester," Delensa said. "We don't know who killed Herald yet, and we don't know if anything has happened to Rosczak. If it has, I'll want to talk to you again."

Chester Zamback rose slowly, grasping the arms of the chair and rocking himself up. He stood still for a moment, then nodded to Sister Carla and left the office, walking as slowly as Mrs. Rosczak had.

"Mrs. Rosczak was there," Sister Carla said to Sheriff Delensa. "She was there."

"At the church?"



"At the cemetery. When I went back. But Mr. Rosczak wasn't there. At least, I didn't see him. Why does Mr. Zamback think something has happened to Mr. Rosczak."

"Because Rosczak is not around. But far as I know, nothing's happened. Mrs. Rosczak tells me he's gone to visit a cousin somewhere."

"You believe her?"

Delensa shrugged. "Not sure. She was pretty vague. She's scared."

Sister Carla nodded. "It appears that Chester Zamback is scared too. So am I." She told Delensa about the black Lexus.

#### FRIDAY

Sister Carla waited outside Saint Casimir's in her locked car for Father Kelski to arrive. She did not intend to go back inside the church alone. She kept her car running, facing Church Road, planning to peel out of the driveway at top speed if she saw a black Lexus coming. She wasn't afraid of fast driving, and by the time the black car turned around, she'd be halfway down to Pottsville.

She checked her watch. Father Kelski was not due for another fifteen minutes.

She heard a car making the curve near the church. She poised her right foot above the gas pedal. Father Kelski's brown Ford Escort came round the bend. He was early. Sister Carla relaxed her foot and turned off the motor.

She got out of the car and waited for him to pull into the driveway.

Pushing himself up off the seat, he stepped out of the car and stared at the church.

"I know," Sister Carla said. "Yellow police tape. Seems, well, almost blasphemous. But Saint Casimir's is a crime scene, isn't it?"

"Sweet Mother, yes, it is. How long will the tape be there?"

"Sheriff Delensa says it will be gone by Sunday. But he wants us to go inside the church to check for anything amiss."

Father Kelski nodded. He stepped away from his car, then reached back for a cane.

Sister Carla watched. She thought Father's hand on the cane looked shakier than usual, but she resisted bounding forward to help.

They climbed the steps to the door. There, she did insist on lifting the tape for Father. He was, after all, twenty or so years older than she. She pulled the police tape away from the door and opened it.

As they entered the church, it occurred to her that, if the black Lexus showed up, she'd have to protect Father, and without her clippers. She wondered if it would be a sacrilege to wield one of the heavy altar candlesticks as a weapon. No doubt, she wouldn't get the chance. She and Father Kelski could be facing some very dangerous men.

She locked the door behind them.

The sun shone on Saint Casimir's today, and light poured through the stained glass in bright red, blue, and gold shafts.

Sister Carla walked to the left, reached behind the confessional, and threw a switch. Light flooded the church. The sheriff had said that the police had found several bullet holes. The engineer had been shot only once; Delensa theorized that the engineer had dodged several shots before one got him.

His theory didn't quite fit with Sister Carla's theory. Hit men, she figured, should be pretty accurate shots. At least, if she were paying good money for a hit man, she'd want some credentials to show that. But then, perhaps, the men had been shooting at someone else who was at the church. Rosczak? But, of course, she thought, hitting her forehead, then straightening her veil. If he had come to meet Herald, he would have witnessed the shooting. Perhaps that was why he had fled Jenkinsville.

She looked round the church but could see no significant damage except for the marble holy water font near the door. The circular top looked slightly off center, as if it had taken a blow.

She turned and glanced down the aisle. Nothing protruded from the pews. "It will take only half an hour or so to get the altar ready and the missals in place for Sunday," she told Father Kelski.

She hustled up the aisle, anxious to get the job done.

Father Kelski wandered toward the chapel.

Sister Carla went behind the altar into the sacristy and picked up a basket of missals. She dropped the basket when Father Kelski shouted, and the missals tumbled out.

Sister grabbed a candlestick and ran out of the sacristy and toward Saint Casimir's chapel.

Father Kelski pointed up. "Look."

Sister Carla gasped. "But it was there yesterday." She moved into the chapel, not willing to believe her eyes. The thick glass case protecting the Saint Casimir icon was gone. And so was the icon.

Sister Carla looked down at glass, shattered and scattered on the floor. She bent to pick up a piece of the glass case, then looked at the smooth oak base on which the icon had sat, bare and empty. She looked from the glass shard to the frame and back, hardly comprehending what she was seeing.



Within five minutes, she and Father Kelski, hanging on to the edge of his seat, were speeding down to the sheriff's office.

"How did the thieves get in?" Sister Carla asked, as much of herself as of Father Kelski. "The door was locked. No windows were broken; I'm sure of that. I looked around. I would have noticed."

Father Kelski said nothing.

"I have a key, of course. And the spare I gave to the mining engineer was in his pocket. The sheriff has it. Could the engineer have made a copy?"

Still Father Kelski said nothing.

"Only you have the other key," Sister Carla said. The blasphemous suspicion came into her head once again. She shelved it quickly.

Finally, Father spoke. "Saint Casimir's. Doomed. Burning. And our beloved icon. A treasure of our church and our town." He shook his head. "Better to be dead than to see the icon gone. Better to be dead."

He sounded hysterical. Sister Carla hoped she wouldn't have to slap him. But then, a doom did seem to hang over Jenkinsville, as Mrs. Rosczak had said, a doom like the smoke and fumes on a damp day.

She shook herself. Those who had stayed in the town seemed trapped into a paralyzing fear of devils, fire, and death. She wanted to keep her own head clear. No devil had shot the engineer or stolen the Saint Casimir icon. A living, breathing human had done that.

Sheriff Delensa, rather relieved that Sister Carla had come to report a theft rather than another murder, led the way back to the church. He examined the front door. "Like you said, it hasn't been jimmied or tampered with, at least as far as I can see. No windows broken, you say?"

"None," Sister Carla said.

The sheriff unlocked the door and made his way to Saint Casimir's chapel, Sister Carla and Father Kelski behind him. Father Kelski stopped halfway down the aisle and sat in a pew. "I can't look again," he said.

Sister Carla went on, almost hoping the icon would have miraculously reappeared. It hadn't.

"Any other entrance to the church?" the sheriff asked.

"A back door to the left behind the sacristy. But we open it only during services. In case of emergency."

"Show me."

Sister Carla led the way.

Sheriff Delensa turned to Sister Carla. "Maybe this is how the thief got in, and maybe the murderer too."

"Hmm," Sister Carla murmured. "We are likely talking about different people, aren't we? Hit men don't usually steal, do they?"

"I'm not up on their habits. But we've got two gunmen. The bullet that killed Herald was a different caliber than the bullets that pierced the walls of the church."

Sheriff Delensa bent to examine the lock. "Doesn't look tampered with. Who has a key to this door?"

"Only myself and Father Kelski."

Sheriff Delensa stared at Sister Carla for a moment, then at Father Kelski. "Well, someone may have opened this door, walked in and walked out. Probably somebody who knows the church well."

Sister Carla felt that she or Father Kelski might be in need of a good lawyer.

#### SATURDAY

Sister Carla spent Saturday grading her students' history papers. She tried to discipline her mind to concentrate but could not. She felt guilty. Had she remembered that back door, had she checked it herself, had she told the sheriff about it, it would have been locked. The icon would still be in the church. No, it wouldn't, she reminded herself. The door had been locked. The thief must've had a key.

She sighed, picked up a paper on spies in the Revolutionary War, and began reading. The paper was superficial. She looked at the bibliography. Only two sources and not very good ones. From the Internet. Not reliable. It was hard these days to get students to settle down in a library to use good records and sources.

Her head swung up. Sources, she thought. Records. Such as parish records. "Holy Saint Christopher," she mumbled aloud. She was as bad as her students. She should have thought of the records sooner. Well, she could get to Saint Casimir's on Monday, as the school retreat days meant no lessons until Tuesday. She'd go directly after morning prayers, if the convent car were available. "Holy Saint Christopher," she said again. She did always have a tendency to swear. But, she figured, using Christopher was okay. He'd been desainted years ago, if that were the proper word.

#### MONDAY

Sister Carla pulled the convent car behind the rectory of Saint Casimir's where it could not be seen from the road. Inside the rec-

tory, the sun shone brightly through the window of the parish office. She did not need to turn on a light. She locked the doors behind herself and placed the convent cell phone on the desk. She could call the sheriff in a hurry if need be.

She began with the first record book she found in the top drawer of the first file cabinet. The book listed births, deaths, baptisms, first holy communions, confirmations. The second and third books listed parishioners who'd given larger than usual sums of money to the church. The Fletcher name was prominent in this book. She recognized other names of families from Jenkinsville, including her own. Her father had given a reasonably large sum one Christmas, no doubt the year he'd sold the house his brother had left him. A few other families were there, including the Rosczaks, who'd given substantial donations around the years their daughter was hospitalized. Bribes to God, Sister Carla thought sacrilegiously, but she sympathized. It must have taken all their savings.

She searched through the top three drawers of an additional file cabinet before she found what she wanted. For twenty years, Father Kelski, his mind better than it was now, had kept records of the organists, caretakers, altar boys, and other parishioners who had worked in the church. He had noted to whom he'd given keys, making Xs or checks by each name, including her own and Walter Rosczak's, once caretaker for the church.

Sister Carla thought about Mrs. Rosczak in the cemetery the day the engineer had been murdered. She'd clutched her purse to herself, as if she had a gun in there. But what earthly reason could she have for killing a mine engineer? Besides, it was hardly likely that she could fire a gun with any accuracy.

Sister Carla checked the names again. She had two checks by her name. But by her name were also two empty spaces. There were four checks in the spaces by Walter Rosczak's name. She ran her finger down the list. Chester Zamback. A check and an X by his name and two empty spaces. This looked more promising. An unreturned key perhaps.

Sister Carla looked again at Father Kelski's notations. Some other names had four checks.

She pulled the church keys from her pocket and fingered them. Two keys. Two checks. Two empty spaces with no checks.

She whistled long and low. Chester Zamback, the carpenter at Saint Casimir's school and church, had an X by his name. Sister Carla hit her forehead, then straightened her veil. What if X did not mean unreturned keys? Empty spaces meant that. What if X meant key to the icon box? Chester Zamback, the carpenter for the school and the church, had undoubtedly made the oak box by

the cemetery shrine and the oak frame box and base that secured the icon of Saint Casimir, the frame that had been opened by the thief. Not a thief who had to smash the glass box, but a thief who had unlocked the frame, lifted the glass, taken the icon, and then smashed the glass.

Sister Carla dislodged her veil again. Of course, that's what had bothered her about the glass, what she had not understood. A thief who had no key would have had to smash the thick glass and reach in for the icon. Pieces of glass would have remained in the groove of the oak frame. There had been none. Chester Zamback had lifted out the glass and smashed it on the floor to simulate the breaking of glass as a thief without a key would have had to do. It was time to visit the sheriff again.

"Not again," Delensa said when she walked into his office.

"I'm used to greetings like 'hello,' or 'The Lord be with you,'" Sister Carla said. "I suppose the bearers of bad news have been maligned since ancient times, but this time, I don't bring bad news. At least, it's bad for only one person."

She explained what she'd found in the records.

"Of course," the sheriff said. "Chester Zamback did all the church's carpentry work." He shook his head. "Hard to believe he'd murder, though, even for the icon."

"Who says he did?"

"I do. I haven't been just sitting on my duff while you've been checking the parish records, you know. I've been checking the gun stores within fifty miles. Found the right one in Wilkes-Barre. The owner sold a pistol to Chester Zamback."

"All the saints in Heaven," Sister Carla sighed. "Have you arrested Chester?"

"No. He's now gone missing, like Rosczak. Possible they're in this together."

"Rosczak too? But why him? What motive?"

"One of the oldest, I suspect. Money. The icon. I'm betting they planned to steal it and got caught in the act by the mine engineer. One of them shot Herald. They fled, came back the next day to finish the theft."

Sister Carla folded her hands in her lap and sat back. "No," she said finally. "Too many loose ends. Too many holes in your theory."

"Like?"

"Like several shots. Why?"

"I explained that a while ago."

"What about the black Lexus?"

"Okay. That's a loose end. But we've no proof that the car is any-



thing other than some tourists. Or maybe some kids with a stolen car. Or maybe . . .”

“Not convincing.”

“Well, it’ll have to do until I find out more. In the meantime, keep in mind that finding the murderer is my job, not yours.”

Sister Carla shrugged. The sheriff was right, of course, but she had to admit to enjoying, just a bit, her detective work. She wondered if that were a sin. She decided it was perhaps rather ghoulish, but not a transgression of any of the Ten Commandments.

She drove back to the convent, hitting the gas pedal hard in frustration. Maybe Rosczak and Zamback had been at the church. Maybe they had shot the engineer. She knew the depth of frustration and anger in those remaining in Jenkinsville. But she couldn’t believe that they would have stolen the icon. And why would Mr. Rosczak leave his wife alone in Jenkinsville? She thought about Mrs. Rosczak clutching her purse, frightened. What did Mrs. Rosczak know?

Sister Carla parked the car and went to Mother Superior. She wanted to keep the convent car a bit longer.

#### TUESDAY

She parked the Honda CRV to the side of the Rosczaks’ white clapboard house, standing by itself like a lone icicle resisting the heat of the sun when all others had long since melted away. On either side of the house stretched sidewalks and paths that led to nowhere. The lawn was still green, kept warm even in the autumn chill, and on each side of the house rose narrow rectangles of brick, like so many chimneys for a house luxurious with fireplaces. Only they were not chimneys. They were shorings, holding the house up, keeping the wooden frame from expanding and contracting too much with the cold of the air and the heat of the fire beneath. The shorings would eventually fail to do their job, but by the time of the death of their house and Jenkinsville itself, the Rosczaks would be dead too.

Sister Carla fingered her rosary.

She stepped out of the car, reminding herself that it was not the devil at work here, but human emotions and faults: greed, exploitation, and, if she were right, fear. It was not just sulfur and burning earth one smelled. It was fear. It had exuded from Mrs. Rosczak that day in the cemetery. The pale skin drawn tight. The clutched purse.

Sister Carla knocked on the door and waited for an answer.

A car drove by, its motor humming as it drove over the scorched earth.

Sister Carla knocked louder.

A curtain in the window to the left moved. A moment later, Mrs. Rosczak opened the door halfway. "Sister," she said.

The smell of fear intensified.

"Mrs. Rosczak, I need to ask you something."

Mrs. Rosczak shook her head. "I am not well. Please go away."

"You must talk to someone. If not me, it will be the sheriff again. You must let me help."

Mrs. Rosczak opened the door fully.

Sister Carla stepped inside. Behind her, she heard the hum of the motor. She could taste the fear rising in her own throat.

Mrs. Rosczak stood paralyzed.

Sister Carla looked around. "Lock the door and come in here," she said. She took Mrs. Rosczak's arm and pulled her into the parlor. They sat on a pale blue sofa, flanked by tables that held pictures of a brown-haired young woman with large eyes.

Sister Carla wasted no time. There was little to waste. "Where is Mr. Rosczak?"

Mrs. Rosczak shook her head.

"You don't know, or you won't tell me?"

Mrs. Rosczak sat still.

"He was there, was he not? At the church when the engineer was shot?"

Mrs. Rosczak swallowed.

"He had the keys to the church, I know. But his keys were duplicates, weren't they? Only the front door is new. So he had to enter by the back door, the same door through which he left the church."

"Yes, but he killed no one."

"Mrs. Rosczak, what was in the church? Your husband had duplicate keys made for some purpose. Had he always planned to steal the icon?"

Mrs. Rosczak gasped. "He did not steal the icon. He did not. He . . . he had to get something from the church. But he did not steal the icon."

Sister Carla remembered. "The marble holy water font. It was moved. Why?"

Mrs. Rosczak nodded. Her body shook. "He hid the papers in the font's hollow column years ago and left them there. Maps of the mines. But he killed no one. He wanted to give the maps to the mine engineer."

"What do the maps show?" Sister Carla could have guessed, but she wanted to keep Mrs. Rosczak talking.

"The mine fire. The maps show that the Fletcher Company used

the pit on the outskirts of the town as a landfill. The pit had holes in the walls and floor from the mining. My husband said that state law required that the holes be filled with incombustible materials. They were not."

"So the maps will show that the Fletcher Company was responsible for the mine fire, and therefore, is liable." Sister Carla nodded. "Yes, and just when Fletcher is campaigning for reelection." She flared with anger. "But why did your husband keep the maps? Why didn't he reveal what he knew years ago?"

Mrs. Rosczak put her face into her hands. When she looked up, her eyes were almost shut. "We used the maps. The Fletchers paid for my daughter's medical expenses and my husband's silence. You must understand. She would have died otherwise. She had asthma and the sulfur fumes and gases that had seeped into the house were killing her."

"And when you finished paying the bills, you donated money to the church."

Mrs. Rosczak's hands shook. "I know what we did was wrong. Maybe everyone in Jenkinsville may have received some money if we told, but it would not have been enough for us to save Donna."

"But Mr. Rosczak never returned the maps to the Fletchers?"

Mrs. Rosczak shook her head. "No. He told the Fletchers that he'd destroyed them. My husband said they knew he didn't, but they knew we would keep silent as long as our daughter was alive. Now . . ." Mrs. Rosczak lifted her hands, a gesture of futility.

"Mrs. Rosczak, so you have the papers now?"

"Yes. They came to the church looking for the maps."

Sister Carla nodded. "They shot the engineer."

Tears seeped down Mrs. Rosczak's cheeks and dropped onto the white collar of her dress. "Chester did. He did not mean to shoot him. He went to the church with my husband to get the icon." She shook her head, the only vigorous movement she made. "But not to steal. He was afraid it would be returned to the Fletchers. They had donated the icon, and always spoke of it as theirs. Chester thought they would reclaim it. He panicked when he heard him." Mrs. Rosczak's words tumbled out in a fury. "He thought the engineer was someone sent by Fletcher. Chester came out of the chapel and saw the engineer. He thought the engineer was reaching for a gun. He shot him, then ran. There were two other men there. They fired, but my husband ran. He knew the men the Fletchers hired would look for him. So he hid the maps. Behind the pot of flowers on our daughter's grave." Mrs. Rosczak subsided. She seemed to shrivel.

Sister Carla felt as if she'd taken a blow. Delensa had been

right, at least in part. Mr. Zamback, if not Mr. Rosczak, had gone to the church to remove the icon, and he'd shot the engineer. Then, he'd returned to get the icon. No wonder Chester Zamback had said it was all his fault. She looked at Mrs. Rosczak, then rose. There were still the two gunmen. And if she were right this time, they were still after the Rosczaks. "I see," she said to Mrs. Rosczak. "So your husband sent you to get the maps. I saw you put something into your purse. I thought it was a small shovel or some other tool to tend the grave. Mrs. Rosczak, where is your husband now?"

Mrs. Rosczak said nothing.

"He is hiding? But you must see that he is in danger. Both of you. He cannot come out of hiding until the papers are public. Fletcher's men won't let up until they get the papers. You do see that. And he will be blamed for the murder too."

Mrs. Rosczak nodded.

Sister Carla thought. "Now," she said. "Now. We have to get the papers to the sheriff." She thought about the car that had driven up and down the highway, the black Lexus she had seen the day of the engineer's murder. It was, no doubt, lurking outside right now, waiting for Mr. Rosczak's return or waiting for Mrs. Rosczak to go to him. Or waiting to enter the house. "Does your back yard connect to the driveway?"

"Yes."

"Get the maps and your coat."

Mrs. Rosczak sat for a moment, then stood. "I know you are right," she whispered.

Sister Carla went to the front window and peeked out from behind the curtain. She saw no black car.

She turned and stared for a moment at the purse Mrs. Rosczak clutched to herself. "We must move fast," she said. "And let me do the talking to the sheriff. Just listen to what I say. Don't talk until I finish."

Leaving the light in the parlor on, they left by the back door and slid along the wall to the convent car.

Sister Carla released the emergency brake, started the car, and backed out of the driveway, with her foot pressing on the gas pedal. The car shot back, then shot forward with a squeal and a jerk.

She heard a second squeal and saw in the rearview mirror the black car pull onto the highway from the remains of a side street. She sped up, hurling down the mountain road.

In the rearview mirror, she watched the black car gaining on them. She calculated the time it would take to reach the sheriff's office: fifteen minutes. Not enough time.

Sister Carla said a speedy prayer, then decided. Beside her, Mrs. Rosczak sat immobile, the purse still clutched to herself.

Burned out trees and reddish earth swept by in a blur.

Ahead, Sister Carla saw the sign warning of the danger of driving onto the burnt earth.

"Brace yourself," she told Mrs. Rosczak.

She reached the dirt road that led into the heart of the burning area. She swung the car onto the road and bounced over it with bone-rattling force.

The black car followed in a cloud of coal dust and cinders.

Sister Carla leaned forward. The car climbed the slope. She knew what lay beyond and knew that she had one chance to get out alive.

She neared the top of the slope.

"Brace yourself," she yelled again to Mrs. Rosczak. She swung the Honda to the right, then hard to the left across the dirt road.

The black car braked, sending up another cloud of black dust and dirt, then sped up and followed, looming in the rear window.

Sister Carla jerked the steering wheel again, and the Honda swung to the left, just skirting a pit. The car screeched, circled, rocked, tilted, then bounced back onto the dirt road.

In the rearview mirror, Sister Carla saw the black car go over the top of the pit.

Mrs. Rosczak screamed at the sound of the explosion.

Sheriff Delensa rose and stared at Sister Carla and Mrs. Rosczak. "Now what the hell?"

Sister Carla helped Mrs. Rosczak into a chair and stood, her arm round the old woman's shoulders.

Delensa listened intently. He glanced now and then at Mrs. Rosczak but did not interrupt Sister Carla's tale.

When she finished, the sheriff sat silently for a few moments. "Chester Zambak is dead," he said finally. "I found him this morning. In his bedroom. Suicide. With a pistol."

The three kept silent for a moment.

"The icon?" Sister Carla asked.

Sheriff Delensa shook his head. "Missing."

#### FRIDAY

Sister Carla lit the candle on the altar of Saint Casimir's, then knelt and said a prayer of thanks and supplication. She was thankful to be alive and thankful that Mrs. Rosczak and her husband, out of hiding now, were alive and safe. Though Sister Carla had not told the sheriff of the blackmail years ago, the Rosczaks had done so.

The sheriff doubted that they would be charged. And though organized crime had been known to be connected to some coal mining operations, Delensa wasn't even sure the hit men could be firmly connected to the Fletchers. Justice had always been hard to come by in the anthracite coalfields. He figured the Fletchers would be able to make some deal in the courts to limit their liability for the fire, but he hoped they'd be held accountable enough to provide some compensation for the church.

So much had already been hurt or destroyed by corruption and greed: the mine engineer; the people of the town whose health had suffered; Jenkinsville, more dead than alive now.

Sister Carla said a prayer for the soul of one of the men hired to get the mine maps and kill Rosczak. The other man was in the hospital with burns and broken bones. Sister Carla could not bring herself to say a prayer for him.

She did say a prayer for the soul of Chester Zamback. She still could not believe he had stolen the icon.

She rose and left the church, not bothering to lock the door.

She walked to the cemetery, stopping to say a prayer at the grave of her parents. She blessed herself and looked up at the shrine to Saint Casimir. The candle on the box had burned out. Only a lump of wax remained.

From the black sack she carried, she pulled out a candle. She knelt to place it in the glass chimney on the box. She paused, then rubbed her hand over the box. It was polished oak, beautifully made. Around the bottom ran a frame in which the walls of the box sat.

She ran her fingers round the frame. At the back, she felt metal: the small lock.

She rose, looked round, saw no one, then stepped up to the low relief of Saint Casimir, wondering. She ran her fingers beneath the hem of his shirt.

The key was there. The key to the kingdom of God. Saint Casimir's key. The key to the oak box at the foot of the shrine.

Sister Carla opened the box. It was there, nestled between two spare glass chimneys.

The icon was still in Jenkinsville. ♀



# BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

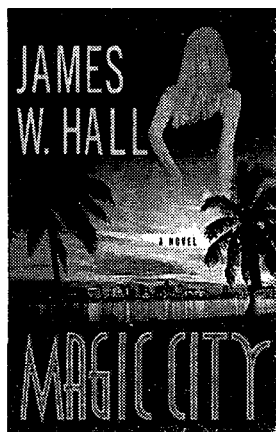
**T**wo tales that share a Cuban flavor and the follow-up to a critically acclaimed debut constitute this month's selections. James W. Hall's thriller, *Magic City* and Mayra Montero's *Dancing to "Almendra"* both find inspiration in the American mob's influence in Cuba during the middle part of the twentieth century, while Steve Hockensmith, well known to readers of AHMM, follows his Edgar-nominated first novel with a new adventure featuring the Amlingmeyer brothers.

James W. Hall's loner hero, Thorn, has been a hit ever since his debut in *Under Cover of Daylight* twenty years ago. That novel wasn't intended to be the start of a series. Since then Hall has produced a number of stand-alones, an excellent book of short stories (*Paper Products*, 1991), a collection of essays, and eight more novels featuring Thorn, including his latest, *MAGIC CITY* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.95).

Despite Thorn's penchant for privacy, if not seclusion, Hall manages to find ingenious ways to involve the Florida resident in plenty of compelling action. Thorn is in love and is even contemplating the unthinkable—moving to Miami to be with Alexandra and her father, Lawton, who's sliding ever deeper into the clutches of Alzheimer's. As a kind of test, Thorn plans to spend a week living at Alexandra's place and taking care of her father while she is away.

Thorn is therefore in a position to leap into action when two men attempt a burglary to retrieve a photo in Lawton's possession of the memorable Cassius Clay/Sonny Liston fight and part of the crowd at the 1964 Miami bout. It is this photo that is the catalyst for the adventure that follows. But Hall also uses the still shot to frame the remarkable era when Castro had come to power and the U.S. had not yet learned to deal with it. Miami was a city in ferment with its new influx of Cubans, racial unrest, and politicians and powerful mob figures scheming to find advantage.

That tumultuous period still casts a long shadow, and Thorn must decipher the photo's importance even if he has to team up with a putative enemy who is also desperate to understand its import. The result is another top-notch thriller that uses a volatile bit of history to



ratchet suspense and continues to build Thorn's reputation as one of the most memorable and reliable heroes of modern thrillers.

Cuban-born journalist Mayra Montero takes root in the same past in *DANCING TO "ALMENDRA"* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$24), which is translated from the Spanish by Edith Grossman. The novel is set in Cuba in 1957, when the old order was crumbling and revolution was coloring the climate. Havana was still a glittering capital where American mobsters vied for control of the lucrative hotels, casinos, and nightclubs. The principal narrator is young journalist Joaquín Porrata, who's been relegated to producing entertainment features when what he really wants to do is cover "hard" news. When Joaquín reads about the hit in New York on crime boss Umberto Anastasia, he knows the mobster's death will have important repercussions in Havana. But when he asks to cover that story, his editor sends him instead to the zoo to cover the brutal killing of a hippopotamus.

It takes a fertile imagination to connect the two events but Montero does so brilliantly as she weaves Joaquín's family's story and that of Yolanda, a one-time magician's assistant who lost an arm when one of his "tricks" didn't work as it was supposed to. Yolanda is now reputed to be the girlfriend of powerful mobster Luigi Santo Trafficante, one of Meyer Lansky's lieutenants.

When he finally gets the opportunity he sought, Joaquín gets a rude education in the sordid realities behind the pervasive gang activities in Havana and New York, while the sad story of Yolanda plays as an odd, surrealistic refrain of pain and suffering. Montero proves to be musician and magician as she tells an entrancing story of love and violence in the last days before Batista's regime fell.

Steve Hockensmith's first novel, *Holmes on the Range*, won all sorts of plaudits from critics, including starred reviews from such important review sources as *Publisher's Weekly*, *Booklist*, and *Library Journal*, as well as from this reviewer (AHMM, April 2006).

Now Gustav (Old Red) and Otto (Big Red) are back for a well-deserved encore in which they abandon the range for the railcar. While the title is *ON THE WRONG TRACK* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$23.95), Hockensmith is definitely on the right track. His sophomore effort is even better than his debut.

For those unfamiliar with the Amlingmeyer brothers, the "old" in Old Red's name is strictly relative—the twenty-seven-year-old cowboy detective is older by some years than brother Big Red. Old Red took a real fancy to the Sherlock Holmes tales that his brother read aloud to him (Old Red's illiterate) and in his first case proved to himself (if no one else) that he has what it takes to be a detective.

But finding a detective agency willing to give a couple of saddle burns jobs as detectives proves difficult, until they run into legendary Pinkerton man Burl Lockhart, who recommends the boys to the

Southern Pacific Railroad Co. where they are signed on instantly. The SPRR is having troubles with the notorious Give-'em-Hell gang, and the Amlingmeyers are to be shipped from Ogden, Utah, to San Francisco aboard the Pacific Express to be trained.

Hockensmith has a ball with the trek as the Amlingmeyers cope with the vagaries of train travel and a load of passengers that includes everything from an obnoxious salesman, a beautiful and adventurous lady, a Chinaman escorting a coffin, an officious railroad officer, a snake, and a snake in the grass. And Big Red reveals another weakness almost as serious as his illiteracy.

The boys will have not only their wits tested, but their courage as well as they try to survive the wicked trials their creator has designed for them in this rollicking sequel. Hockensmith reveals more about the background of the brothers, which will undoubtedly be of interest to fans of the series. And as an afterthought, here's one fan's hope that a man as intelligent and determined as Old Red will not be satisfied to remain illiterate much longer.

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Following the critical success of 2004's 9/11 drama *Absent Friends*, S. J. Rozan offers us *IN THIS RAIN* (Delacorte, \$24), her second standalone novel, and her latest love letter to New York City—albeit signed in blood.

Showboating land developer Walter Glybenhall and Albany-bent mayor Charlie Barr are fixing under-the-table deals on a city-owned Harlem block, which when developed would gentrify the historically black neighborhood and cement the developer's reputation as untouchable. But when suspicious accidents turn deadly on another of Glybenhall's projects in the Bronx—seemingly damning his bid for the Harlem block—the irascible Ann Montgomery, an inspector for the Department of Investigation, finds the trail of evidence leads almost too perfectly back to Glybenhall, not his apparent competitor, Ford Corrington, a mentor to Harlem's troubled youth, who's laid out his own plans to develop the up-for-grabs property into a community center.

Strong personalities fight for the focus of the novel as it follows Montgomery's turbulent investigation into who is really pulling the strings, and the complex plot has enough twists and turns to keep the reader guessing until the end. Rozan juxtaposes the beauty of the Big Apple and the ugliness of its corruption as she skillfully weaves the textures of the city into this suspenseful tale. The smell of water in the air of downtown Manhattan, the sticky taste of red bean buns in Brooklyn, and the thumping of beat boxes on Harlem's streets come alive behind clashing egos and far-reaching subplots, which altogether comprise an engrossing read that will sate natives and out-of-towners alike.

—Nicole K. Sia

# HOW TO SURVIVE DOWNSIZING

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J. MICHLITSCH

**G**eoffrey Manning sat on the curb, his temple resting against the side of a large metal trashcan. On it someone had stenciled in block letters, "Park Butts Here." A cardboard box filled with the remnants of Geoff's career sat next to him. An address book, a leggy philodendron, an old clock radio, a Minnesota Twins mug, a fistful of various writing utensils, and several packages of Post-its that weren't, technically, his property.

He had taken the bus from work as usual, as if it were any ordinary Friday evening. But instead of riding it all the way home, he decided at the last moment to disembark in front of The Dockside. The bar sat overlooking the Saint Croix River in a spot north of the cities and not yet engulfed by developers. Guys like Geoff, dressed in button-down collars, sport coats, and pressed chinos, were an oddity at the watering hole generally frequented by the biker set. But in spite of their differences, by the end of the night they were brothers-in-arms trying to erase the events of the day, week, month.

At two A.M. the bartender herded Geoff and his few remaining compatriots to the door. Moments later, the green and blue neon sign above The Dockside's entry blinked off. Its electric buzz severed, Geoff was left standing in the parking lot, alone in a bubble of silence. That's when he eased down to the curb, sitting next to the garbage can.

Not having enough money left for cab fare, calling Brit was his only option. Geoff's cell phone threw a comforting blue glow into his hands as he brought up his friend's number.

"Eight years you gave those people," Brit Sanderson said after Geoff told her the news of his downsizing. "You put in, what, sixty hours a week? I bet you were the hardest working employee they had. I can't believe it." Her words came in sharp staccato bursts. "They're going to replace you, I assume?"

"Outsourced," he barked, his voice flat in the still night.

"To some dude for a quarter of the pay, no doubt. It's things like this that make me believe I'm out here arresting the wrong people. It's the corporate fat cats that need policing." Brit snorted. "That company never appreciated you anyway, if you ask me. Your boss couldn't even get your name right. What'd he call you? Jimmy? Johnny?"

"Jerry," Geoff answered, although he couldn't exactly wrap his tongue around the word. It sounded more like "jury."

"Yeah, well, anyway. I can be there in twenty minutes. Just sit tight."

Geoff slipped the cell phone into his jacket pocket and did what he was told: He waited. Some time later, his head leaning against the trashcan and a bit of spittle collecting at the side of his mouth, Geoff awoke from his doze to see two headlights appear over the top of the metal bin. As he chased away the drool with the back of his hand and reached for his carton, the lights passed by, stopping one hundred feet or so at the side of the road.

If he had been in a more coherent state, Geoff wouldn't have bothered reaching for his belongings, as he would have realized Brit didn't drive an SUV. But, at that moment, Geoff was in no shape to make the distinction.

As he struggled to his feet, he saw a man—not Brit, he was able to surmise—exit the SUV. The man walked around the vehicle, opened the passenger side door, leaned in, and took something into his arms. In the light coming from inside the car, Geoff could see it was a woman the man drew from the vehicle, her long hair falling across his shoulder as he picked her up. The plump moon illuminated a pair of creamy white legs that, even to Geoff's foggy mind, didn't look quite right. One was tapered, whereas the other seemed to end bluntly. But when the man walked around the SUV and took his first step into the grassy ditch at the side of the road, something fell, and then the legs were symmetrical again.

The man carried the woman down the gully and into the pine trees that skirted the river beyond.

Geoff started for the car, his carton under his arm.

Later the police will ask Geoff if he intended to follow the couple into the trees.

"No," Geoff will say. "I just thought the polite thing to do was to find the woman's shoe and return it to her."

"So why didn't you?"

To this he will say, "I guess I was too drunk."

And if anyone saw him that night, they could have attested to such, for as he made his way to the SUV he swayed unsteadily. When he reached the vehicle, he adjusted his focus toward the

ground. He glimpsed the outline of a shoe, or more specifically, a ladies' stiletto. He reached down with his free hand and picked it up. Just then, a second set of headlights came down the road and pulled into The Dockside. "That's my ride," thought Geoff, and he started back toward the parking lot. When he reached Brit's car, he dropped the brown pump into his carton and opened the passenger's side door.

"Hey, buddy," Brit said, as Geoff settled himself in his seat. "Long day, huh?"

"Very," he said. He was asleep seconds later.

Geoff awoke the next morning sprawled out on the sofa in his living room, still fully clothed from the night before. He was in no hurry to open the lids of his eyes. Instead he opted to keep them shut tight and go over the events of the day before. It had not been a dream, of course, Mr. Hanley inviting him into his office to break the news.

Geoff wasn't the first employee to find himself in this position. For the last several months, the Company had been going through a restructuring, meaning it was combining jobs, eliminating others, and farming the rest out. Geoff's position fell into the latter category.

"As you know, Jerry, we have had to make . . . Sorry to have to tell you . . . We're sure you can understand . . . We were happy to have you as a member of . . . Thanks for your understanding, Jerry."

He barely heard the man's insipid speech, for he couldn't take his eyes off the desk between them. Unfurled upon it were blueprints. The irony of the situation was unbearable: Geoff was getting downsized, while his boss was getting upsized to a two story minimansion. And what did he say to his boss in response to the flagrant inequity of the situation? He offered the man his hand and said, "Thank you."

Geoff groaned as he pushed himself up on the couch. He sat there for a moment, wondering what he should do next, both with his life and the day. He couldn't remember the last time he had woken up with a hangover or the last Saturday he didn't spend at the office. The best idea would be to go back to sleep, wake up on Sunday, a day he knew what to do with. The newspaper in the morning, a ball game on television in the afternoon, a pizza for dinner.

He held his head in his hands, rubbing his temples. On the floor next to him sat the paraphernalia of his former career. In the eight years he had worked for the Company, Geoff had never stolen



anything. Fudging on his time card was out of the question as well, so when he remembered ransacking the supply closet yesterday afternoon, regret curled up in his stomach. Perhaps he'd mail the pens and Post-its back in an anonymous package with a note attached. "Took these by mistake," it would say. He leaned over and withdrew the philodendron, one of its long tendrils catching on another object in the carton.

"What the—?" he asked. He reached into the box and freed a size seven ladies' brown Italian leather stiletto from the plant's vine. Had there been a woman the night before at The Dockside? Surely not. Geoff wasn't in the habit of picking up strange women, let alone absconding with one of their shoes.

And then it came to him.

He asked himself some of the same questions the police will ask him in a few days from now. "Why didn't you say anything, Geoff? Why didn't you tell your friend Sergeant Sanderson?"

"I didn't want to bother her. I didn't think it was important," will be his answer.

"But the next morning you thought differently."

"Yeah," Geoff will say.

He scrambled to his feet, and as quickly as he could, he made his way to the bathroom, undressing along the way. He climbed into the shower, hoping the hot water would clear his mind. It did.

With his car parked in The Dockside's lot, Geoff walked the length of road to where he thought he saw the man and the woman, keeping an eye on the hardscrabble tufts that carpeted the ditch. He went several yards beyond what he thought necessary and then turned around and started back. During this second pass, Geoff studied the growth farther down where the shade of trees smothered light. The blades stood like delicate picket fences between trunks of pine. It wasn't long before he noticed a section of long grass had been disturbed, pushed to the side, forming an unnatural V. Geoff made his way to the opening. He studied the ground for a moment and then continued into the cool shade of the pines, their needles softening his steps.

Through the trees came the sound of hurried water. As the pines opened up, the ground seemed to curl under, falling down to river's edge six feet below. The river was a dark, churning moat carrying with it a cool breeze from the north.

Geoff stood with his hands at his hips, looking up and down stream. He began to second-guess his motives for coming here. The supple pine needles could provide a soft bed. Perhaps the

man carried the woman into the woods as a romantic gesture. Perhaps the whole thing was an innocent tryst.

Geoff tried to remember what he saw, exactly. Was the woman conscious? Was her head lolling, or merely inclined toward her lover's chest? As he considered his answers, he studied the shore below his feet. Deciding a closer look was necessary, he slid down the eroded crag. When he reached the bottom of the cliff, he brushed off the seat of his jeans and studied the rocky shoreline.

It looked as if someone had scattered diamonds along the river's edge, as rushing water winked between the smooth rocks that shouldered it. Geoff walked gingerly along the shore, using the toe of his shoe to push aside larger stones. About ten feet from where he dropped down from the cliff, he saw the unmistakable sheen of metal between the tumbled rocks. He reached down and pulled from the stones a key chain.

Or at least half a key chain. It was the kind with two rings held together with a spring-loaded pin at the center. It held a house key, a brass tab with the initials L.M. engraved on it, as well as a small plastic card, which was attached to the ring through a hole at one of the card's corners. The printing on the front of the tag proclaimed it a Riley & Richardson's Regular Reader's Reward Card. Geoff turned it over, examining a familiar collection of orderly black lines. If it were like all other bar codes, it had information associated with it.

Apparently, he would have something to do today after all.

**R**iley & Richardson's was a megamart for the book-lover crowd. As Geoff wasn't much of a reader, he was unfamiliar with its inventory, but he wanted to make the best of the situation.

He wrote off fiction immediately, as there were too many choices. He hadn't taken a vacation in years, so he skipped the travel section. He remembered his college history textbooks used to put him to sleep, therefore Geoff walked past those shelves too. In the corner, he came upon the self-help group. *How to Get a Man, How to Change a Man, How to Conquer Your Fears, How to Interpret Your Dreams, How to Survive Downsizing*. Geoff paused on this last one. The book's back cover promised that the author would help him find a job that he would love and would pay well. He assumed the procedure to do so had changed since he had joined the Company eight years ago. Believing it to be an investment in his future, he carried the paperback to the checkout counter at the front of the store.

"Good afternoon," said the young woman at the register.

Geoff gave her a friendly nod and smile. He handed over the book and held out the small plastic card from the key chain. The girl scanned them both.

"That'll be fifteen thirty-five," she said.

From his pocket, Geoff withdrew his wallet and took out a twenty. "I was wondering if you could check the address you have on file for that card." Geoff felt his heart travel to his throat even before he spoke his next sentence. "I moved recently, and I want to make sure I gave you the right information. I don't have everything committed to memory yet." He felt his face grow warm and hoped the girl would assume he was embarrassed by his own inadequacies and not because he was afraid of being caught in a lie.

"Certainly," said the affable young woman. She made change, slipped his receipt inside the book, and then pressed a few keys on her terminal. A second later she said, "Leeann Miller. 12650 Cherry Hill Drive."

"Hey, how about that? I got it right," Geoff said, flashing the girl a smile.

"Leeann's your wife?"

"That's right," said Geoff, feeling a bit more at ease.

"Pretty name," said the girl, as she handed over his book.

On the way out to his car, Geoff mumbled under his breath. When he slipped into the driver's seat, he reached over to open the glove box. He found a nub of a pencil and wrote inside the front cover of the book, "Leeann Miller. 12650 Cherry Hill Drive."

As it turned out, Cherry Hill Drive was the well-to-do Wisconsin cousin of his middle-income Minnesota neighborhood. Only a bridge, a million-dollar mortgage, and a million-dollar view separated them.

Leeann Miller's house, like the rest in this prestigious development, sat on a cliff overlooking the river. The big brick two story with a garage the size of an airplane hangar was at least fifty years newer than Geoff's little Rambler.

He drove down the wide, well-manicured street and then made a U-turn. As he came back toward the house, he slowed down and pulled over to the side of the road, stopping behind a stand of precisely planted, perfectly coiffed shrubs.

Slouching down into his seat, he turned on the radio to pick up the Twins game at the middle of the third inning and waited. The boys of summer were up by two when one of the doors of the home's garage opened and a navy blue SUV the size of a tank rolled out and down the driveway.

At a safe distance, Geoff followed the SUV as it traveled south and

then west, taking the bridge back into Minnesota. The behemoth vehicle traveled along the river toward more populated suburbs until it found its way into a complex of lately built row houses.

In the communal parking area, a tall, dark-haired man in his forties, dressed in clothes that could easily pay Geoff's next month's house payment, emerged from the SUV. He went to one of the center townhouses, the door opening before the man knocked. A tall blond woman wearing a barely nothing pale blue dress emerged and flung her arms around his neck, drawing him inside.

Geoff recalled the figure he'd seen in the man's arms the night before. Long hair caressing both of their shoulders. Unless Leeann Miller had chopped off her locks since last night, this was not Leeann Miller.

The next morning Geoff awoke at six thirty, his body programmed to the Company's time. He sat with the paper spread out on his kitchen table for an hour or two, sipping coffee from his Twins mug and circling possible job opportunities in the employment section. At nine o'clock, feeling unimpressed by the selection afforded to him, Geoff left the paper, refilled his mug, grabbed the book he bought yesterday at Riley & Richardson's, and headed over the river.

By ten thirty, he had finished the book's first chapter, "Embrace Possibilities," in which the author asserted that losing his job might be the best thing that could have happened to him. Geoff doubted it, but continued on. Halfway through the second chapter, "Make Opportunities Happen," there had been no activity inside or outside the house on Cherry Hill Drive. Mr. SUV probably spent the night at the lanky blonde's, Geoff suspected. He studied the house one more time and then put down the book and unfolded himself from his car.

As Geoff walked up the property's long walkway, he studied the neighborhood. Mortgages of the homes in this area bought a lot of land and a lot of privacy. He wondered what these people did for a buck to afford to live in such places. Although, for all anyone knew, they could be credit rich and cash poor. This extravagance could be a façade, their homes' interiors devoid of furnishings. Something had to be wrong. No one's life could be as perfect as these people's seemed.

When he reached the door, Geoff rang its bell and waited. When no answer came, he took one last look around, and then he slipped the key he had found into the door's dead bolt. It fit perfectly.

Inside the house was cool and quiet. The marble floor in the foyer seemed to add to its stillness. Geoff pulled off his shoes,

carrying them into the stainless steel and black granite kitchen. A gourmet's dream. On one wall he noticed there hung a small decorative blackboard. "Marcus, Dentist September 7th, 1 pm," someone had written in white chalk. The right leg of the M curved around on itself. Surely a feminine hand.

Next, Geoff checked the cupboards. He made an approving hum when he noticed the spice bottles were alphabetized. The handles of the coffee cups all faced the same direction as well, and the drinking glasses were organized by height.

With shoes still in hand, he headed for the massive center staircase. Upstairs, the smallest two bedrooms stood empty, another was being used as an office, and another as a guest room. The largest served as the master. At its center sat a four-poster bed he would have needed a step stool to climb into. He scanned the walls and the table and dresser tops for portraits. There were none.

Geoff went through one of the doors off the master, which led to a bathroom the size of Geoff's kitchen. The marble-topped vanity held scant articles, including a bottle of some sort of beauty potion and a basket of uselessly small soaps in the shape of roses. He tried the drawers and found a hairbrush. Long brunette strands were tangled in its bristles. Geoff lifted an eyebrow in a wary comma. "So who was the slinky blonde, Marcus?" he asked, his voice echoing among the stone and glass.

The second room off the bedroom was a walk-in closet. Inside it, Geoff was met with similar tidiness. He let loose a low whistle as he paged through several dozen expensive suits, laundered Oxfords still cloaked in their plastic, pressed khakis, and a rainbow selection of polo shirts. The woman's side of the closet held the feminine equivalent. Geoff sifted through the dresses. A pink, white, and brown print caught his eye. It looked as if it had been plucked from a box of sweets. Although Geoff had little knowledge of designer names, he recognized the label inside: Claudia Cane.

At the end of the woman's hangers there stood a line of hooks. From them dangled a dozen or so handbags. Geoff sifted through them, finding the one on the hook closest to the door bulging slightly. He opened the bag. A small mirror, a tube of lipstick, a package of tissues, a tin of breath mints, and a prescription bottle of Valium. But these were insignificant to the other thing he found in the bag, the thing that told him Marcus Miller's life was anything but perfect.

"Why didn't you call Sergeant Sanderson after you found the handgun in Leeann Miller's handbag?" the authorities will ask later.

"I wanted to, but I was afraid of how I found out about it."

"So you knew what you were doing was illegal?"

"Well," Geoff will stammer, "I do now, but at the time, I mean, I did have a key."

"Don't worry about it, Geoff. We won't prosecute you for the break-in. In return for your testimony, of course."

"Of course."

So instead of calling the police, Geoff drove across the bridge to home, where he called Fast Frankie's.

While he waited for his pizza to arrive, he unpacked his carton of belongings, still sitting on the living room floor from Friday night. After giving the plant a much-needed drink from the tap, he placed it at the center of his kitchen table. He put the Twins mug to his left, pens and Post-its to the right, and between them like a plate he positioned his address book. He left the clock radio in the box, but withdrew the brown stiletto, which he placed opposite him.

The brown stiletto had whisker creases behind the toe, and its heel was tapered like a stem of a martini glass.

He sat for a moment, considering the rest of the objects on the table. He opened the address book to the Ms and added a new entry. Employing his cell phone, Geoff dialed information. Moments later, he wrote the Millers' telephone number next to their address.

After the pizza was delivered—in less than forty-five minutes, as promised—Geoff spent a quiet dinner with his guest, the stiletto. As he ate, he considered its color, size, and its wearer. She was thirty-two, five feet seven inches, outgoing, had excellent taste in clothing, and was a brunette. He was only certain of the last two.

When he was through eating, Geoff picked up *How to Survive Downsizing* and started the next chapter, "Be Persistent." In it the author wrote that "Just because a company says they're not hiring now doesn't mean they won't be hiring next week. Keep yourself in the forefront of their minds. Remember: Wishing what you want and telling someone what you want are two very different things."

Later that night, he traded his how-to for his address book and headed back over to the Miller house. By the time he found his hiding place behind the manicured bushes, it was ten forty-five. Soft landscape lights washed the façades of the residences on Cherry Hill Drive, including the former home of Leeann Miller.

Geoff picked up his cell phone and dialed the number he read off his address book's latest entry.

"Yeah," said the baritone voice on the other end of the line.

Geoff let a moment of silence settle in, then he said, "Leeann needs her Valium."

"Who is this?" demanded Marcus Miller.

Geoff gently closed his phone, slouched down in his seat, and waited. An hour later, when the lights went out in the Miller house, Geoff went home.

On Monday night, Geoff once again stationed himself behind the bushes and made another call.

"Leeann doesn't want you to forget your dentist appointment next Friday," he said to the man on the other end of the line.

Although his reminder did provoke a few fresh words from Mr. Miller, it did not rouse him from his million-dollar cocoon.

Tuesday night found Geoff undercover again. He picked up his phone and said to the man at the other end of the line, "Leeann wants her pink and brown dress. You know, the Claudia Cane." He paused for a moment, swallowing hard. "And she's missing a brown leather pump too. Could you bring it to her?"

Mr. Miller was silent and then, finely, he said, "I don't know who you are, but this is getting very old."

Geoff snapped his phone shut. He was sure this call would provoke Marcus Miller into action. But the man was still sitting tight hours later. Although the lights in the home were still blazing at half past one, Geoff finally decided to call it a night. As he started the car and pulled away from his hiding spot, he considered what his next move might be. Perhaps during tomorrow night's call he would mention what he saw Friday night by the road. "You carried her into the trees. Did you think no one would see you?"

While Geoff practiced his next phone encounter with the murderer, he noticed headlights in his rearview mirror. It was Miller's massive SUV.

Geoff felt the blood drain from his face; his hands on the steering wheel began to tingle. When he came to the intersection, he pulled into the right lane. The SUV drew alongside him, taking up all of what remained of the road, and then made a turn left. Geoff waited a few moments. He maneuvered his car over and made the same turn. Miller took the bridge back over the river and traveled northward, with Geoff again at a safe distance behind.

Although The Dockside's green and blue neon sign had already been extinguished for the night, he knew exactly where Miller turned off the road. Geoff continued a mile or two before turning around and heading back downriver. He killed his engine a few hundred feet before coasting to the edge of the road. Geoff got



out of his car and made his way past The Dockside's parking lot, now barren save for the SUV.

He could see the glint of a flashlight coming through the trees. Easing down into the ditch, Geoff went toward the unsteady beam that took him into the pine trees. Ahead where the conifers opened up, the light from the moon fell upon Miller. Geoff could see him stride toward the cliff, shining his flashlight onto the shore below. Then Miller crouched to the ground, and in an instant he was gone, dropped to the river's edge below.

"Why did you decide to call the police at that point, Geoff?" the authorities will ask him later.

"Because I knew Miller was looking for evidence he left behind. If I hadn't said anything, he could have gotten away with it," Geoff will add pointedly.

The cops will nod, agreeing with him. His story finished, Geoff's relief will be palatable. Much as it was that night when he heard Brit's voice coming from the other end of his cell phone.

"Hey, Geoff. What's up?"

Over the next few days, the police searched the stand of pines, the shore, and the river. They did not find Leeann's body. They did, however, find droplets of blood among the fallen needles and in Mr. Miller's SUV. And in the garbage can of the million-dollar property on Cherry Hill Drive, they found the partner to a size seven brown Italian leather stiletto with Leeann's blood and Miller's fingerprints all over it. This evidence, coupled with Geoff's testimony and several of Leeann's friends, who told stories of domestic threats and philandering, helped seal Miller's conviction. Both the prosecution and the defense used the lack of a body to bolster their case.

"Where is Leeann Miller if Marcus Miller didn't kill her?" asked the former.

"Where is Leeann Miller's body if Marcus Miller killed her?" asked the latter.

In the end, those on the jury were more swayed by the first question, which was answered by the investigators. She would pop up downriver. It was just a matter of time.

Except for the day of his testimony, Geoff followed the trial in the papers. It was just as well, since lately his time was being eaten up settling in at a new job.

Although he had finished *How to Survive Downsizing*, Geoff thought the last chapter, "Find The Recognition You Deserve," was the most beneficial. He realized he was to blame, all those years

ago, when he didn't correct Mr. Hanley the first time he called him by the wrong name. Why, Geoff asked himself, did he work so hard for someone who couldn't even get his *name* right? Good old Jerry helped line Hanley's pockets without so much as a thank you—until the end that is, until good old Jerry was fired.

This was why, when Geoff started at the New Company, he decided to speak up for himself. First he asked for a different chair rather than sit on the uncomfortable one left behind by the former employee who had occupied his cubical. If he was going to put in sixty hours a week, he decided he should at least have something comfy to sit on. He also asked for a wireless mouse, a new keyboard, and a better stapler, plus several other things he couldn't even remember. For a while, he was getting a package every day as his requests were honored.

So when he saw the parcel on his desk the morning after Marcus Miller's sentencing, he assumed it was one of his forgotten demands.

This box, however, did not look quite like the others he had received. It was wrapped in plain postal paper, sans the office supply store's monogram, and it had a note attached. "Geoffrey Manning," was written in careful letters on the front of the envelope. There was something familiar about the effeminate hand, and after a moment it came to him. Sitting heavily in his new chair, he slipped the card free.

"Geoff—For justice and a job well done," read the note. "Thank you. L.M."

He tore the wrapping free and opened the gold foil box. The pink, white, and brown sweets inside looked as if they were plucked from Leeann Miller's closet. ♀

### **Solution to the May "UNSOLVED"**

Kurt Rafferty attacked and robbed Louie Quigley.

DAY	HUSBAND & WIFE	CAR	STATE	NECKTIE
Mon.	Harry & Betty O'Hara	Audi	UT	red & blue
Tue.	Louie & Edith Quigley	Chevy	TX	orange
Wed.	Isaac & Alice North	Datsun	TN	red & blue
Thr.	George & Cathy Parker	Buick	SC	blue
Fri.	Jack & Flora Moore	Ford	WA	red & orange
Sat.	Kurt & Donna Rafferty	Olds	VA	orange

# MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Michael Gesinger/Graphistock*

## A Dead Faint

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "June Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

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The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

## THE SAFETY MATCH

**O**n the morning of October 6, 1885, in the office of the inspector of police of the second division of S— District, there appeared a respectably dressed young man, who announced that his master, Marcus Ivanovitch Klausoff, a retired officer of the Horse Guards, separated from his wife, had been murdered. While making this announcement the young man was white and terribly agitated. His hands trembled and his eyes were full of terror.

"Whom have I the honor of addressing?" asked the inspector.

"Psyekoff, Lieutenant Klausoff's agent; agriculturist and mechanic!"

The inspector and his deputy, on visiting the scene of the occurrence in company with Psyekoff, found the following: Near the wing in which Klausoff had lived was gathered a dense crowd. The news of the murder had sped swift as lightning through the neighborhood, and the peasantry, thanks to the fact that the day was a holiday, had hurried together from all the neighboring villages. There was much commotion and talk. Here and there, pale, tear-stained faces were seen. The door of Klausoff's bedroom was found locked. The key was inside.

"It is quite clear that the scoundrels got in by the window!" said Psyekoff as they examined the door.

They went to the garden, into which the bedroom window opened. The window looked dark and ominous. It was covered by a faded green curtain. One corner of the curtain was slightly turned up, which made it possible to look into the bedroom.

"Did any of you look into the window?" asked the inspector.

"Certainly not, your worship!" answered Ephraim, the gardener, a little gray-haired old man, who looked like a retired sergeant. "Who's going to look in, if all their bones are shaking?"

"Ah, Marcus Ivanovitch, Marcus Ivanovitch!" sighed the inspector, looking at the window, "I told you you would come to a bad end! I told the dear man, but he wouldn't listen! Dissipation doesn't bring any good!"

"Thanks to Ephraim," said Psyekoff, "but for him, we would never have guessed. He was the first to guess that something was

wrong. He comes to me this morning, and says: 'Why is the master so long getting up? He hasn't left his bedroom for a whole week!' The moment he said that, it was just as if someone had hit me with an ax. The thought flashed through my mind, 'We haven't had a sight of him since last Saturday, and today is Sunday!' Seven whole days—not a doubt of it!"

"Ay, poor fellow!" again sighed the inspector. "He was a clever fellow, finely educated, and kind-hearted at that! And in society, nobody could touch him! But he was a waster, God rest his soul! I was prepared for anything since he refused to live with Olga Petrovna. Poor thing, a good wife, but a sharp tongue! Stephen!" the inspector called to one of his deputies, "go over to my house this minute, and send Andrew to the captain to lodge an information with him! Tell him that Marcus Ivanovitch has been murdered. And run over to the orderly; why should he sit there, kicking his heels? Let him come here! And go as fast as you can to the examining magistrate, Nicholas Yermolaiyevitch. Tell him to come over here! Wait; I'll write him a note!"

The inspector posted sentinels around the wing, wrote a letter to the examining magistrate, and then went over to the director's for a glass of tea. Ten minutes later he was sitting on a stool, carefully nibbling a lump of sugar, and swallowing the scalding tea.

"There you are!" he was saying to Psyekoff; "there you are! A noble by birth! A rich man—a favorite of the gods, you may say, as Pushkin has it, and what did he come to? He drank and dissipated and—there you are—he's murdered."

After a couple of hours the examining magistrate drove up. Nicholas Yermolaiyevitch Chubikoff—for that was the magistrate's name—was a tall, fleshy old man of sixty, who had been wrestling with the duties of his office for a quarter of a century. Everybody in the district knew him as an honest man, wise, energetic, and in love with his work. He was accompanied to the scene of the murder by his inveterate companion, fellow worker, and secretary, Dukovski, a tall young fellow of twenty-six.

"Is it possible, gentlemen?" cried Chubikoff, entering Psyekoff's room, and quickly shaking hands with everyone. "Is it possible? Marcus Ivanovitch? Murdered? No! It is impossible! Im-poss-i-ble!"

"Go in there!" sighed the inspector.

"Lord, have mercy on us! Only last Friday I saw him at the fair in Farabankoff. I had a drink of vodka with him, save the mark!"

"Go in there!" again sighed the inspector.

They sighed, uttered exclamations of horror, drank a glass of tea each, and went to the wing.

"Get back!" the orderly cried to the peasants.

Going to the wing, the examining magistrate began his work by examining the bedroom door. The door proved to be of pine, painted yellow, and was uninjured. Nothing was found which could serve as a clew. They had to break in the door.

"Everyone not here on business is requested to keep away!" said the magistrate, when, after much hammering and shaking, the door yielded to ax and chisel. "I request this, in the interest of the investigation. Orderly, don't let anyone in!"

Chubikoff, his assistant, and the inspector opened the door, and hesitatingly, one after the other, entered the room. Their eyes met the following sight: Beside the single window stood the big wooden bed with a huge feather mattress. On the crumpled feather bed lay a tumbled, crumpled quilt. The pillow, in a cotton pillowcase, also much crumpled, was dragging on the floor. On the table beside the bed lay a silver watch and a silver twenty-kopeck piece. Beside them lay some sulphur matches. Beside the bed, the little table, and the single chair, there was no furniture in the room. Looking under the bed, the inspector saw a couple of dozen empty bottles, an old straw hat, and a quart of vodka. Under the table lay one top boot, covered with dust. Casting a glance around the room, the magistrate frowned and grew red in the face.

"Scoundrels!" he muttered, clenching his fists.

"And where is Marcus Ivanovitch?" asked Dukovski in a low voice.

"Mind your own business!" Chubikoff answered roughly. "Be good enough to examine the floor! This is not the first case of the kind I have had to deal with! Eugraph Kuzmitch," he said, turning to the inspector, and lowering his voice, "in 1870 I had another case like this. But you must remember it—the murder of the merchant Portraitoff. It was just the same there. The scoundrels murdered him, and dragged the corpse out through the window—"

Chubikoff went up to the window, pulled the curtain to one side, and carefully pushed the window. The window opened.

"It opens, you see! It wasn't fastened. Hm! There are tracks under the window. Look! There is the track of a knee! Somebody got in there. We must examine the window thoroughly."

"There is nothing special to be found on the floor," said Dukovski. "No stains or scratches. The only thing I found was a struck safety match. Here it is! So far as I remember, Marcus Ivanovitch did not smoke. And he always used sulphur matches, never safety matches. Perhaps this safety match may serve as a clew!"

"Oh, do shut up!" cried the magistrate deprecatingly. "You go on about your match! I can't abide these dreamers! Instead of chasing matches, you had better examine the bed!"



After a thorough examination of the bed, Dukovski reported:

"There are no spots, either of blood or of anything else. There are likewise no new torn places. On the pillow there are signs of teeth. The quilt is stained with something which looks like beer and smells like beer. The general aspect of the bed gives grounds for thinking that a struggle took place on it."

"I know there was a struggle, without your telling me! You are not being asked about a struggle. Instead of looking for struggles, you had better—"

"Here is one top boot, but there is no sign of the other."

"Well, and what of that?"

"It proves that they strangled him, while he was taking his boots off. He hadn't time to take the second boot off when—"

"There you go!—and how do you know they strangled him?"

"There are marks of teeth on the pillow. The pillow itself is badly crumpled, and thrown a couple of yards from the bed."

"Listen to his foolishness! Better come into the garden. You would be better employed examining the garden than digging around here. I can do that without you!"

When they reached the garden they began by examining the grass. The grass under the window was crushed and trampled. A bushy burdock growing under the window close to the wall was also trampled. Dukovski succeeded in finding on it some broken twigs and a piece of cotton wool. On the upper branches were found some fine hairs of dark blue wool.

"What color was his last suit?" Dukovski asked Psyekoff.

"Yellow crash."

"Excellent! You see they wore blue!"

A few twigs of the burdock were cut off, and carefully wrapped in paper by the investigators. At this point Police Captain Artsuybasheff Svistakovski and Dr. Tyutyeff arrived. The captain bade them "Good day!" and immediately began to satisfy his curiosity. The doctor, a tall, very lean man, with dull eyes, a long nose, and a pointed chin, without greeting anyone or asking about anything, sat down on a log, sighed, and began:

"The Servians are at war again! What in heaven's name can they want now? Austria, it's all your doing!"

The examination of the window from the outside did not supply any conclusive data. The examination of the grass and the bushes nearest to the window yielded a series of useful clues. For example, Dukovski succeeded in discovering a long, dark streak, made up of spots, on the grass, which led some distance into the center of the garden. The streak ended under one of the lilac bushes in a dark brown stain. Under this same lilac bush was



found a top boot, which turned out to be the fellow of the boot already found in the bedroom.

"That is a blood stain made some time ago," said Dukovski, examining the spot.

At the word "blood" the doctor rose, and going over lazily, looked at the spot.

"Yes, it is blood!" he muttered.

"That shows he wasn't strangled, if there was blood," said Chubikoff, looking sarcastically at Dukovski.

"They strangled him in the bedroom; and here, fearing he might come round again, they struck him a blow with some sharp-pointed instrument. The stain under the bush proves that he lay there a considerable time, while they were looking about for some way of carrying him out of the garden."

"Well, and how about the boot?"

"The boot confirms completely my idea that they murdered him while he was taking his boots off before going to bed. He had already taken off one boot, and the other, this one here, he had only had time to take half off. The half-off boot came off of itself, while the body was dragged over, and fell—"

"There's a lively imagination for you!" laughed Chubikoff. "He goes on and on like that! When will you learn enough to drop your deductions? Instead of arguing and deducing, it would be much better if you took some of the bloodstained grass for analysis!"

When they had finished their examination, and drawn a plan of the locality, the investigators went to the director's office to write their report and have breakfast. While they were breakfasting they went on talking:

"The watch, the money, and so on—all untouched—" Chubikoff began, leading off the talk, "show as clearly as that two and two are four that the murder was not committed for the purpose of robbery."

"The murder was committed by an educated man!" insisted Dukovski.

"What evidence have you of that?"

"The safety match proves that to me, for the peasants hereabouts are not yet acquainted with safety matches. Only the landowners use them, and by no means all of them. And it is evident that there was not one murderer, but at least three. Two held him, while one killed him. Klausoff was strong, and the murderers must have known it!"

"What good would his strength be, supposing he was asleep?"

"The murderers came on him while he was taking off his boots. If he was taking off his boots, that proves that he wasn't asleep!"

"Stop inventing your deductions! Better eat!"

"In my opinion, your worship," said the gardener Ephraim, setting the samovar on the table, "it was nobody but Nicholas who did this dirty trick!"

"Quite possible," said Psyekoff.

"And who is Nicholas?"

"The master's valet, your worship," answered Ephraim. "Who else could it be? He's a rascal, your worship! He's a drunkard and a blackguard, the like of which Heaven should not permit! He always took the master his vodka and put the master to bed. Who else could it be? And I also venture to point out to your worship, he once boasted at the public house that he would kill the master! It happened on account of Aquilina, the woman, you know. He was making up to a soldier's widow. She pleased the master; the master made friends with her himself, and Nicholas—naturally, he was mad! He is rolling about drunk in the kitchen now. He is crying, and telling lies, saying he is sorry for the master—"

The examining magistrate ordered Nicholas to be brought. Nicholas, a lanky young fellow, with a long, freckled nose, narrow-chested, and wearing an old jacket of his master's, entered Psyekoff's room, and bowed low before the magistrate. His face was sleepy and tear stained. He was tipsy and could hardly keep his feet.

"Where is your master?" Chubikoff asked him.

"Murdered, your worship!"

As he said this, Nicholas blinked and began to weep.

"We know he was murdered. But where is he now? Where is his body?"

"They say he was dragged out of the window and buried in the garden!"

"Hum! The results of the investigation are known in the kitchen already!—That's bad! Where were you, my good fellow, the night the master was murdered? Saturday night, that is."

Nicholas raised his head, stretched his neck, and began to think.

"I don't know, your worship," he said. "I was drunk and don't remember."

"An alibi!" whispered Dukovski, smiling and rubbing his hands.

"So-o! And why is there blood under the master's window?"

Nicholas jerked his head up and considered.

"Hurry up!" said the captain of police.

"Right away! That blood doesn't amount to anything, your worship! I was cutting a chicken's throat. I was doing it quite simply, in the usual way, when all of a sudden it broke away and started to run. That is where the blood came from."

Ephraim declared that Nicholas did kill a chicken every evening, and always in some new place, but that nobody ever heard of a half-killed chicken running about the garden, though of course it wasn't impossible.

"An alibi," sneered Dukovski; "and what an asinine alibi!"

"Did you know Aquilina?"

"Yes, your worship, I know her."

"And the master cut you out with her?"

"Not at all. *He* cut me out—Mr. Psyekoff there, Ivan Mikhailovitch; and the master cut Ivan Mikhailovitch out. That is how it was."

Psyekoff grew confused and began to scratch his left eye. Dukovski looked at him attentively, noted his confusion, and started. He noticed that the director had dark blue trousers, which he had not observed before. The trousers reminded him of the dark blue threads found on the burdock. Chubikoff in his turn glanced suspiciously at Psyekoff.

"Go!" he said to Nicholas. "And now permit me to put a question to you, Mr. Psyekoff. Of course you were here last Saturday evening?"

"Yes! I had supper with Marcus Ivanovitch about ten o'clock."

"And afterwards?"

"Afterwards—afterwards— Really, I do not remember," stammered Psyekoff. "I had a good deal to drink at supper. I don't remember when or where I went to sleep. Why are you all looking at me like that, as if I was the murderer?"

"Where were you when you woke up?"

"I was in the servants' kitchen, lying behind the stove! They can all confirm it. How I got behind the stove I don't know—"

"Do not get agitated. Did you know Aquilina?"

"There's nothing extraordinary about that—"

"She first liked you and then preferred Klausoff?"

"Yes. Ephraim, give us some more mushrooms! Do you want some more tea, Eugraph Kuzmitch?"

A heavy, oppressive silence began and lasted fully five minutes. Dukovski silently kept his piercing eyes fixed on Psyekoff's pale face. The silence was finally broken by the examining magistrate:

"We must go to the house and talk with Maria Ivanovna, the sister of the deceased. Perhaps she may be able to supply some clues."

Chubikoff and his assistant expressed their thanks for the breakfast, and went toward the house. They found Klausoff's sister, Maria Ivanovna, an old maid of forty-five, at prayer before the big case of family icons. When she saw the portfolios in her guests' hands, and their official caps, she grew pale.

"Let me begin by apologizing for disturbing, so to speak, your devotions," began the gallant Chubikoff, bowing and scraping. "We have come to you with a request. Of course, you have heard already. There is a suspicion that your dear brother, in some way or other, has been murdered. The will of God, you know. No one can escape death, neither czar nor plowman. Could you not help us with some clew, some explanation—?"

"Oh, don't ask me!" said Maria Ivanovna, growing still paler, and covering her face with her hands. "I can tell you nothing. Nothing! I beg you! I know nothing—What can I do? Oh, no! no!—not a word about my brother! If I die, I won't say anything!"

Maria Ivanovna began to weep, and left the room. The investigators looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders, and beat a retreat.

"Confound the woman!" scolded Dukovski, going out of the house. "It is clear she knows something and is concealing it! And the chambermaid has a queer expression too! Wait, you wretches! We'll ferret it all out!"

In the evening Chubikoff and his deputy, lit on their road by the pale moon, wended their way homeward. They sat in their carriage and thought over the results of the day. Both were tired and kept silent. Chubikoff was always unwilling to talk while traveling, and the talkative Dukovski remained silent, to fall in with the elder man's humor. But at the end of their journey the deputy could hold in no longer, and said:

"It is quite certain," he said, "that Nicholas had something to do with the matter. *Non dubitandum est!* You can see by his face what sort of a case he is! His alibi betrays him, body and bones. But it is also certain that he did not set the thing going. He was only the stupid hired tool. You agree? And the humble Psyekoff was not without some slight share in the matter. His dark blue breeches, his agitation, his lying behind the stove in terror after the murder, his alibi and—Aquilina—"

"Grind away, Emilian; it's your week!" So, according to you, whoever knew Aquilina is the murderer! Hothead! You ought to be sucking a bottle, and not handling affairs! You were one of Aquilina's admirers yourself—does it follow that you are implicated too?"

"Aquilina was cook in your house for a month. I am saying nothing about that! The night before that Saturday I was playing cards with you, and saw you, otherwise I should be after you too! It isn't the woman that matters, old chap! It is the mean, nasty, low spirit of jealousy that matters. The retiring young man was not pleased when they got the better of him, you see! His vanity, don't you

see? He wanted revenge. Then, those thick lips of his suggest passion. So there you have it: wounded self-love and passion. That is quite enough motive for a murder. We have two of them in our hands; but who is the third? Nicholas and Psyekoff held him, but who smothered him? Psyekoff is shy, timid, an all-round coward. And Nicholas would not know how to smother with a pillow. His sort use an ax or a club. Some third person did the smothering; but who was it?"

Dukovski crammed his hat down over his eyes and pondered. He remained silent until the carriage rolled up to the magistrate's door.

"Eureka!" he said, entering the little house and throwing off his overcoat. "Eureka, Nicholas Yermolaïyevitch! The only thing I can't understand is, how it did not occur to me sooner! Do you know who the third person was?"

"Oh, for goodness sake, shut up! There is supper! Sit down to your evening meal!"

The magistrate and Dukovski sat down to supper. Dukovski poured himself out a glass of vodka, rose, drew himself up, and said, with sparkling eyes:

"Well, learn that the third person, who acted in concert with that scoundrel Psyekoff, and did the smothering, was a woman! Yes-s! I mean—the murdered man's sister, Maria Ivanovna!"

Chubikoff choked over his vodka, and fixed his eyes on Dukovski.

"You aren't—what's-its-name? Your head isn't what-do-you-call-it? You haven't a pain in it?"

"I am perfectly well! Very well, let us say that I am crazy; but how do you explain her confusion when we appeared? How do you explain her unwillingness to give us any information? Let us admit that these are trifles. Very well! All right! But remember their relations. She detested her brother. She never forgave him for living apart from his wife. She is of the Old Faith, while in her eyes he is a godless profligate. There is where the germ of her hate was hatched. They say he succeeded in making her believe that he was an angel of Satan. He even went in for spiritualism in her presence!"

"Well, what of that?"

"You don't understand? She, as a member of the Old Faith, murdered him through fanaticism. It was not only that she was putting to death a weed, a profligate—she was freeing the world of an antichrist!—and there, in her opinion, was her service, her religious achievement! Oh, you don't know those old maids of the Old Faith. Read Dostoyevsky! And what does Lyeskoff say about

them, or Petcherski? It was she, and nobody else, even if you cut me open. She smothered him! O treacherous woman! Wasn't that the reason why she was kneeling before the icons, when we came in, just to take our attention away? 'Let me kneel down and pray,' she said to herself, 'and they will think I am tranquil and did not expect them!' That is the plan of all novices in crime, Nicholas Yermolaiyevitch, old pal! My dear old man, won't you intrust this business to me? Let me personally bring it through! Friend, I began it and I will finish it!"

Chubikoff shook his head and frowned.

"We know how to manage difficult matters ourselves," he said; "and your business is not to push yourself in where you don't belong. Write from dictation when you are dictated to; that is your job!"

Dukovski flared up, banged the door, and disappeared.

"Clever rascal!" muttered Chubikoff, glancing after him. "Awfully clever! But too much of a hothead. I must buy him a cigar case at the fair as a present."

The next day, early in the morning, a young man with a big head and a pursed-up mouth, who came from Klausoff's place, was introduced to the magistrate's office. He said he was the shepherd Daniel, and brought a very interesting piece of information.

"I was a bit drunk," he said. "I was with my pal till midnight. On my way home, as I was drunk, I went into the river for a bath. I was taking a bath, when I looked up. Two men were walking along the dam, carrying something black. 'Shoo!' I cried at them. They got scared, and went off like the wind toward Makareff's cabbage garden. Strike me dead, if they weren't carrying away the master!"

That same day, toward evening, Psyekoff and Nicholas were arrested and brought under guard to the district town. In the town they were committed to the cells of the prison.

## II

**A** fortnight passed.

It was morning. The magistrate Nicholas Yermolaiyevitch was sitting in his office before a green table, turning over the papers of the "Klausoff case"; Dukovski was striding restlessly up and down, like a wolf in a cage.

"You are convinced of the guilt of Nicholas and Psyekoff," he said, nervously plucking at his young beard. "Why will you not believe in the guilt of Maria Ivanovna? Are there not proofs enough for you?"

"I don't say I am not convinced. I am convinced, but somehow

I don't believe it! There are no real proofs, but just a kind of philosophizing—fanaticism, this and that—"

"You can't do without an ax and bloodstained sheets. Those jurists! Very well, I'll prove it to you! You will stop sneering at the psychological side of the affair! To Siberia with your Maria Ivanovna! I will prove it! If philosophy is not enough for you, I have something substantial for you. It will show you how correct my philosophy is. Just give me permission—"

"What are you going on about?"

"About the safety match! Have you forgotten it? I haven't! I am going to find out who struck it in the murdered man's room. It was not Nicholas that struck it; it was not Psyekoff, for neither of them had any matches when they were examined; it was the third person, Maria Ivanovna. I will prove it to you. Just give me permission to go through the district to find out."

"That's enough! Sit down. Let us go on with the examination."

Dukovski sat down at a little table and plunged his long nose in a bundle of papers.

"Bring in Nicholas Tetekhoff!" cried the examining magistrate.

They brought Nicholas in. Nicholas was pale and thin as a rail. He was trembling.

"Tetekhoff!" began Chubikoff. "In 1879 you were tried in the Court of the First Division, convicted of theft, and sentenced to imprisonment. In 1882 you were tried a second time for theft, and were again imprisoned. We know all—"

Astonishment was depicted on Nicholas's face. The examining magistrate's omniscience startled him. But soon his expression of astonishment changed to extreme indignation. He began to cry and requested permission to go and wash his face and quiet down. They led him away.

"Brink in Psyekoff!" ordered the examining magistrate.

They brought in Psyekoff. The young man had changed greatly during the last few days. He had grown thin and pale, and looked haggard. His eyes had an apathetic expression.

"Sit down, Psyekoff," said Chubikoff. "I hope that today you are going to be reasonable, and will not tell lies, as you did before. All these days you have denied that you had anything to do with the murder of Klausoff, in spite of all the proofs that testify against you. That is foolish. Confession will lighten your guilt. This is the last time I am going to talk to you. If you do not confess today, tomorrow it will be too late. Come, tell me all—"

"I know nothing about it. I know nothing about your proofs," answered Psyekoff, almost inaudibly.

"It's no use! Well, let me relate to you how the matter took



place. On Saturday evening you were sitting in Klausoff's sleeping room, and drinking vodka and beer with him." (Dukovski fixed his eyes on Psyekoff's face, and kept them there all through the examination.) "Nicholas was waiting on you. At one o'clock, Marcus Ivanovitch announced his intention of going to bed. He always went to bed at one o'clock. When he was taking off his boots, and was giving you directions about details of management, you and Nicholas, at a given signal, seized your drunken master and threw him on the bed. One of you sat on his legs, the other on his head. Then a third person came in from the passage—a woman in a black dress, whom you know well, and who had previously arranged with you as to her share in your criminal deed. She seized a pillow and began to smother him. While the struggle was going on the candle went out. The woman took a box of safety matches from her pocket, and lit the candle. Was it not so? I see by your face that I am speaking the truth. But to go on. After you had smothered him, and saw that he had ceased breathing, you and Nicholas pulled him out through the window and laid him down near the burdock. Fearing that he might come round again, you struck him with something sharp. Then you carried him away, and laid him down under a lilac bush for a short time. After resting awhile and considering, you carried him across the fence. Then you entered the road. After that comes the dam. Near the dam, a peasant frightened you. Well, what is the matter with you?"

"I am suffocating!" replied Psyekoff. "Very well—have it so. Only let me go out, please!"

They led Psyekoff away.

"At last! He has confessed!" cried Chubikoff, stretching himself luxuriously. "He has betrayed himself! And didn't I get round him cleverly! Regularly caught him napping—"

"And he doesn't deny the woman in the black dress!" exulted Dukovski. "But all the same, that safety match is tormenting me frightfully. I can't stand it any longer. Good-by! I am off!"

Dukovski put on his cap and drove off. Chubikoff began to examine Aquilina. Aquilina declared that she knew nothing whatever about it.

At six that evening Dukovski returned. He was more agitated than he had ever been before. His hands trembled so that he could not even unbutton his greatcoat. His cheeks glowed. It was clear that he did not come empty-handed.

"*Veni, vidi, vici!*" he cried, rushing into Chubikoff's room, and falling into an armchair. "I swear to you on my honor, I begin to believe that I am a genius! Listen, devil take us all! It is funny, and

it is sad. We have caught three already—isn't that so? Well, I have found the fourth, and a woman at that. You will never believe who it is! But listen. I went to Klausoff's village, and began to make a spiral round it. I visited all the little shops, public houses, dram shops on the road, everywhere asking for safety matches. Everywhere they said they hadn't any. I made a wide round. Twenty times I lost faith, and twenty times I got it back again. I knocked about the whole day, and only an hour ago I got on the track. Three versts from here. They gave me a packet of ten boxes. One box was missing. Immediately: 'Who bought the other box?' 'Such-a-one! She was pleased with them!' Old man! Nicholas Yermolaïyevitch! See what a fellow who was expelled from the seminary and who has read Gaboriau can do! From today on I begin to respect myself! Oof! Well, come!"

"Come where?"

"To her, to number four! We must hurry, otherwise—otherwise I'll burst with impatience! Do you know who she is? You'll never guess! Olga Petrovna, Marcus Ivanovitch's wife—his own wife—that's who it is! She is the person who bought the matchbox!"

"You—you—you are out of your mind!"

"It's quite simple! To begin with, she smokes. Secondly, she was head and ears in love with Klausoff, even after he refused to live in the same house with her, because she was always scolding his head off. Why, they say she used to beat him because she loved him so much. And then he positively refused to stay in the same house. Love turned sour. 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.' But come along! Quick, or it will be dark. Come!"

"I am not yet sufficiently crazy to go and disturb a respectable, honorable woman in the middle of the night for a crazy boy!"

"Respectable, honorable! Do honorable women murder their husbands? After that you are a rag, and not an examining magistrate! I never ventured to call you names before, but now you compel me to. Rag! Dressing-gown!—Dear Nicholas Yermolaïyevitch, do come, I beg of you—!"

The magistrate made a deprecating motion with his hand.

"I beg of you! I ask, not for myself, but in the interests of justice. I beg you! I implore you! Do what I ask you to, just this once!"

Dukovski went down on his knees.

"Nicholas Yermolaïyevitch! Be kind! Call me a blackguard, a ne'er-do-weel, if I am mistaken about this woman. You see what an affair it is. What a case it is. A romance! A woman murdering her own husband for love! The fame of it will go all over Russia. They will make you investigator in all important cases. Understand, O foolish old man!"

The magistrate frowned, and undecidedly stretched his hand toward his cap.

"Oh, the devil take you!" he said. "Let us go!"

It was dark when the magistrate's carriage rolled up to the porch of the old country house in which Olga Petrovna had taken refuge with her brother.

"What pigs we are," said Chubikoff, taking hold of the bell, "to disturb a poor woman like this!"

"It's all right! It's all right! Don't get frightened! We can say that we have broken a spring."

Chubikoff and Dukovski were met at the threshold by a tall buxom woman of three and twenty, with pitch-black brows and juicy red lips. It was Olga Petrovna herself, apparently not the least distressed by the recent tragedy.

"Oh, what a pleasant surprise!" she said, smiling broadly. "You are just in time for supper. Kuzma Petrovitch is not at home. He is visiting the priest, and has stayed late. But we'll get on without him! Be seated. You have come from the examination?"

"Yes. We broke a spring, you know," began Chubikoff, entering the sitting room and sinking into an armchair.

"Take her unawares—at once!" whispered Dukovski; "take her unawares!"

"A spring—hum—yes—so we came in."

"Take her unawares, I tell you! She will guess what the matter is if you drag things out like that."

"Well, do it yourself as you want. But let me get out of it," muttered Chubikoff, rising and going to the window.

"Yes, a spring," began Dukovski, going close to Olga Petrovna and wrinkling his long nose. "We did not drive over here—to take supper with you or—to see Kuzma Petrovitch. We came here to ask you, respected madam, where Marcus Ivanovitch is, whom you murdered!"

"What? Marcus Ivanovitch murdered?" stammered Olga Petrovna, and her broad face suddenly and instantaneously flushed bright scarlet. "I don't—understand!"

"I ask you in the name of the law! Where is Klausoff? We know all!"

"Who told you?" Olga Petrovna asked in a low voice, unable to endure Dukovski's glance.

"Be so good as to show us where he is!"

"But how did you find out? Who told you?"

"We know all! I demand it in the name of the law!"

The examining magistrate, emboldened by her confusion, came forward and said:

"Show us, and we will go away. Otherwise, we—"

"What do you want with him?"

"Madam, what is the use of these questions? We ask you to show us! You tremble, you are agitated. Yes, he has been murdered, and, if you must have it, murdered by you! Your accomplices have betrayed you!"

Olga Petrovna grew pale.

"Come!" she said in a low voice, wringing her hands. "I have him—hid—in the bath house! Only for heaven's sake, do not tell Kuzma Petrovitch. I beg and implore you! He will never forgive me!"

Olga Petrovna took down a big key from the wall, and led her guests through the kitchen and passage to the courtyard. The courtyard was in darkness. Fine rain was falling. Olga Petrovna walked in advance of them. Chubikoff and Dukovski strode behind her through the long grass, as the odor of wild hemp and dishwater splashing under their feet reached them. The courtyard was wide. Soon the dishwater ceased, and they felt freshly broken earth under their feet. In the darkness appeared the shadowy outlines of trees, and among the trees a little house with a crooked chimney.

"That is the bath house," said Olga Petrovna. "But I implore you, do not tell my brother! If you do, I'll never hear the end of it!"

Going up to the bath house, Chubikoff and Dukovski saw a huge padlock on the door.

"Get your candle and matches ready," whispered the examining magistrate to his deputy.

Olga Petrovna unfastened the padlock, and let her guests into the bath house. Dukovski struck a match and lit up the anteroom. In the middle of the anteroom stood a table. On the table, beside a sturdy little samovar, stood a soup tureen with cold cabbage soup and a plate with the remnants of some sauce.

"Forward!"

They went into the next room, where the bath was. There was a table there also. On the table was a dish with some ham, a bottle of vodka, plates, knives, forks.

"But where is it—where is the murdered man?" asked the examining magistrate.

"On the top tier," whispered Olga Petrovna, still pale and trembling.

Dukovski took the candle in his hand and climbed up to the top tier of the sweating frame. There he saw a long human body lying motionless on a large feather bed. A slight snore came from the body.

"You are making fun of us, devil take it!" cried Dukovski. "That is not the murdered man! Some live fool is lying here. Here, whoever you are, the devil take you!"

The body drew in a quick breath and stirred. Dukovski stuck his elbow into it. It raised a hand, stretched itself, and lifted its head.

"Who is sneaking in here?" asked a hoarse, heavy bass. "What do you want?"

Dukovski raised the candle to the face of the unknown, and cried out. In the red nose, disheveled, unkempt hair, the pitch-black mustaches, one of which was jauntily twisted and pointed insolently toward the ceiling, he recognized the gallant cavalryman Klausoff.

"You—Marcus—Ivanovitch? Is it possible?"

The examining magistrate glanced sharply up at him, and stood spellbound.

"Yes, it is I. That's you, Dukovski? What the devil do you want here? And who's that other mug down there? Great snakes! It is the examining magistrate! What fate has brought him here?"

Klausoff rushed down and threw his arms round Chubikoff in a cordial embrace. Olga Petrovna slipped through the door.

"How did you come here? Let's have a drink, devil take it! Tra-ta-ti-to-tum—let us drink! But who brought you here? How did you find out that I was here? But it doesn't matter! Let's have a drink!"

Klausoff lit the lamp and poured out three glasses of vodka.

"That is—I don't understand you," said the examining magistrate, running his hands over him. "Is this you or not you!"

"Oh, shut up! You want to preach me a sermon? Don't trouble yourself! Young Dukovski, empty your glass! Friends, let us bring this—What are you looking at? Drink!"

"All the same, I do not understand!" said the examining magistrate, mechanically drinking off the vodka. "What are you here for?"

"Why shouldn't I be here, if I am all right here?"

Klausoff drained his glass and took a bite of ham.

"I am in captivity here, as you see. In solitude, in a cavern, like a ghost or a bogey. Drink! She carried me off and locked me up, and—well, I am living here, in the deserted bath house, like a hermit. I am fed. Next week I think I'll try to get out. I'm tired of it here!"

"Incomprehensible!" said Dukovski.

"What is incomprehensible about it?"

"Incomprehensible! For Heaven's sake, how did your boot get into the garden?"

"What boot?"

"We found one boot in the sleeping room and the other in the garden."

"And what do you want to know that for? It's none of your business! Why don't you drink, devil take you? If you wakened me, then drink with me! It is an interesting tale, brother, that of the boot! I didn't want to go with Olga. I don't like to be bossed. She came under the window and began to abuse me. She always was a termagant. You know what women are like, all of them. I was a bit drunk, so I took a boot and heaved it at her. Ha-ha-ha! Teach her not to scold another time! But it didn't! Not a bit of it! She climbed in at the window, lit the lamp, and began to hammer poor tipsy me. She thrashed me, dragged me over here, and locked me in. She feeds me now—on love, vodka, and ham! But where are you off to, Chubikoff? Where are you going?"

The examining magistrate swore, and left the bath house. Dukovski followed him, crestfallen. They silently took their seats in the carriage and drove off. The road never seemed to them so long and disagreeable as it did that time. Both remained silent. Chubikoff trembled with rage all the way. Dukovski hid his nose in the collar of his overcoat, as if he was afraid that the darkness and the drizzling rain might read the shame in his face.

When they reached home, the examining magistrate found Dr. Tyutyeff awaiting him. The doctor was sitting at the table, and, sighing deeply, was turning over the pages of the *Neva*.

"Such goings-on there are in the world!" he said, meeting the examining magistrate with a sad smile. "Austria is at it again! And Gladstone also to some extent—"

Chubikoff threw his cap under the table, and shook himself.

"Devils' skeletons! Don't plague me! A thousand times I have told you not to bother me with your politics! This is no question of politics! And you," said Chubikoff, turning to Dukovski and shaking his fist, "I won't forget this in a thousand years!"

"But the safety match? How could I know?"

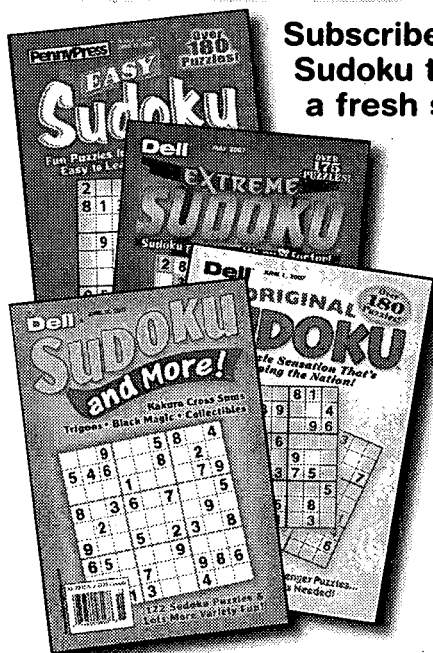
"Choke yourself with your safety match! Get out of my way! Don't make me mad, or the devil only knows what I'll do to you! Don't let me see a trace of you!"

Dukovski sighed, took his hat, and went out.

"I'll go and get drunk," he decided, going through the door, and gloomily wending his way to the public house. ♣

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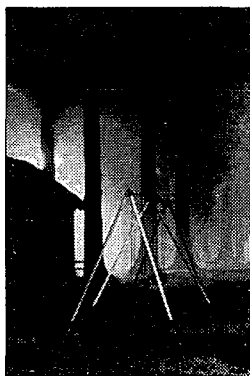
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# THE STORY THAT WON

The December Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Jimmie L. Neighbors of Louisville, Kentucky. Honorable mentions go to Mike Befeler of Boulder, Colorado; Deborah Carron of Otsego, Minnesota; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Benjamin H. Foreman of Harbor Oaks, Florida; James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida; Adrian Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota; Randall A. Martin of Topeka, Kansas; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Pam Skochinski of Rosamond, California; Doug Turnbull of Kingston, Ontario, Canada; and C. Rochelle Weidner of Kaneohe, Hawaii.



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## SWING BY THE CABIN

JIMMIE L. NEIGHBORS

**"H**arold, you are the biggest, bone-headed, moronic imbecile I have ever had the bad luck of being involved with. You know that?"

"Ah, Frank, I told you I was sorry." Harold dropped his little round head down on his huge chest, and his shoulders slumped forward.

"You are sorry! Well ain't that just peachy? Are you sorry about being a bird-brained dingbat or are you sorry I'm going to spend twenty years in prison?"

"Now, Frank, you told me they gave parole for the first offense."

"Yah, and did I mention why I wanted *you* to pick up the guns?"

"You said you were already on parole, and if you got caught you'd have to go back and finish your sentence."

"So, the brain does work. Tell me exactly what happened."

"Well, I drove to the cabin and went to the door. I knocked and a guy opened the door, and I told him I was there to pick up the guns and costumes for the Mercantile Bank heist. He was a real nice man, he invited me in, and there were three other guys sitting by the fireplace, cleaning guns. He asked me again what I wanted, and I repeated the story."

"I drew you a map. I put an X by the cabin you were supposed to go to. I told you swing by the cabin! Not, go by the cabin with the swings. That's Sheriff Reasoner's cabin."

"I said I was sorry, Frank."

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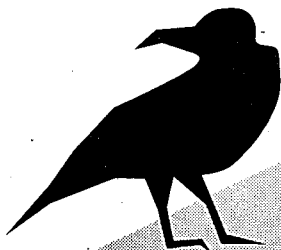
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